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OR,
The Idol of Last Chance.

**A Story of Gold Mines and
Gold Trails.**

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE THE MUTINEER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOVER-ASSASSIN.

UPON the piazza of a handsome mansion, in the outskirts of a Southern city, stood two persons, the moonlight falling full upon them, and revealing a man with tall, erect form, and a young girl clad in white.

"Good night, Myra, for I must be going, as I have to take the early train, you know," said the man.

"Yes, Gabriel, and when next you come it will be to remain, to leave me no more," and the voice trembled slightly.

"It will, my darling—good-night."

The moon had a skurrying cloud-sweep before it and the sudden darkness hid the lovers' part-



ONE SECOND OF SUSPENSE AND THE NOBLE BRUTE ROSE TO THE MIGHTY LEAP AND SEEMED SUSPENDED IN THE AIR ABOVE THE CHASM.

ing kiss, and the next moment the man was hastening away into the town to his hotel.

Gabriel Godfrey and Myra Weston had met a year before while crossing the ocean from Europe, where the young man had been on a tour of pleasure and the maiden had been completing her education at a fashionable young ladies' school in Paris.

She was the only child of a wealthy retired merchant, and, as an only child, was the idol of his heart and heiress of all he possessed.

He had gone abroad to bring his daughter home, and one night in Paris would have been the victim of an escaped lunatic's fury, who rushed upon him, knife in hand, but for timely rescue at the hands of a stranger who secured the madman and turned him over to the police.

The stranger was an American, Gabriel Godfrey. The retired merchant at once felt toward him the greatest gratitude and regard, and insisted upon his dining with him and his daughter at the hotel next day.

The invitation was accepted, and Gabriel Godfrey met the beautiful heiress, Myra Weston, and, by a strange coincidence, he said he had taken passage on the same steamer that was to carry her father and herself back to America.

During the voyage the trio learned to love each other, and when Godfrey visited Myra at her elegant home he asked her father for his daughter's hand.

Of the young man nothing was known other than what he told of himself.

He had been left an orphan, with an inheritance that was given over to him when he arrived at the age of twenty-one, and had been educated under the care of a tutor at his home in Missouri.

Fond of travel he had roamed at will, and enjoyed himself as far as his income, which he said was ample, allowed.

Mr. Weston seemed to be delighted with his prospective son-in-law, and Myra certainly idolized him.

In a few weeks the young couple were to be married, and Gabriel Godfrey had run down to visit Myra before their wedding-day.

He had seemed nervous, she thought, worried about something, and yet he had told her that it was nothing, that he never felt better in his life.

After his departure Myra went up to her room, and, throwing a wrap over her shoulders, sat down in the square bay-window that looked out over the grounds.

The air was not too chilly, and she seemed wrapt up in the beauty of the night.

Suddenly she saw a form near the large gateway.

"It is Gabriel," she said, with some surprise, and she watched him with interest.

As he stood there a man approached him, and the two stepped into the shadow of a tree, and Myra lost sight of them, yet knew they were there.

Suddenly she saw a flash under the tree, and then all was darkness again.

"He is lighting his cigar," she said, and as a tall form stepped out from the shadow of the tree, she added:

"Ah! I know now what he is doing; I am to have a serenade."

Gabriel Godfrey possessed a fine voice, and was an expert performer on the guitar.

Several times before, when he had visited Myra, he had returned from the hotel and serenaded her, and she seemed to feel that such was his intention now.

She saw that he wore a cloak and a different hat, but they did not conceal his form from her loving eyes—she could not be deceived in that.

"He has had a servant from the hotel bring him his guitar, and thinks he will surprise me; but I have my eye on you, sir," and watching him she saw him creep toward the mansion, keeping in the shadow of the ornamental trees, and at last noiselessly ascend the steps of the piazza.

Then she waited for the sound of music; but, not a note was struck on the guitar, and the voice of her lover was unheard.

The moments dragged along, and Myra wondered more and more.

What did her lover mean? How was he trying to surprise her? Had he found her father up and thus entered the mansion for a talk with him?

She would go out into the hall and see if she heard voices in the library.

As she attempted to rise, loud voices rung through the house, followed by a shot and a heavy fall.

Then a quick step sounded on the piazza and a man's form darted down the steps, dropping a lantern as he fled, and sped away in the moonlight, to be joined by the one who waited under the tree.

This much Myra Weston saw, for she was unable to move, and then, as her name was called in a loud voice, she sprang to her feet and hastened down stairs.

Into the library she ran, and there, upon the floor, in his dressing-gown and slippers, as he had come from his sleeping room, lay her father, his face livid, his teeth set to keep back the groans that came to his lips.

"Oh, father, what has happened?" and Myra threw herself down by her father's side.

The lips parted and low, but terribly distinct came the words:

"My child, I am dying, and by the hand of Gabriel Godfrey. I told him to bring to me from the city a large sum of money I had there. He did so, and saw me put it in that desk to-night."

"I came here because I could not sleep, to get the money and carry it to my room. I opened the door; and there he stood, with slouch hat and cloak on, and a lantern, and he had the money in his hands."

"My cry startled him; he turned and—shot me down and fled, and—"

A gasp choked him so he could say no more, and into the room dashed a number of servants, aroused by the shot.

Not another word did the dying man utter, for in half an hour he breathed his last, while over him bent his devoted daughter.

"He is dead," said the doctor, who had been sent for.

"Yes," and with a kiss upon the death-sealed lips, Myra Weston turned away and went to her room.

Then she rung for her maid and said: "Tell Scott I wish him to go to town for me at once."

Seating herself at her desk she wrote as follows:

"GABRIEL GODFREY:—

"A few weeks ago I received an anonymous letter, telling me that you were an adventurer, and lived by gambling."

"I paid no attention to it, not even showing it to my father."

"To-night I suffer the penalty for my trust in you."

"I saw you meet a man near the gate, and with a cloak and another hat on come back to the mansion."

"I heard the shot and the death-cry of my father, and ran to him."

"He lived long enough to tell me who was his murderer, and that he had caught you robbing him."

"So you are known to me as you are, and I warn you never to cross my path again, or I shall send you to the gallows."

"For the sake of the past, I now spare you, but never again to let my eyes rest upon the form of my father's assassin."

"MYRA WESTON."

"P. S.—I will send to your address all that I have ever received from you as souvenirs and letters, and shall expect you to express to me anything of mine in your possession."

Scott carried this letter to the hotel, but brought it back with the word that Mr. Godfrey had left on the one o'clock train, going several hours sooner than he had expected.

"Take the letter to the depot and mail it on the train on which Mr. Godfrey was to have gone," said Myra, and she readdressed and stamped it.

Three hours after the letter was following Gabriel Godfrey to his home.

CHAPTER II.

UNMASKED AND UNWEPT.

ON the banks of the upper Mississippi River there stood an old house, a ruin of what had once been a fine estate; but decay had fallen upon the mansion. The outhouses were tumbling down, the fences broken and only one wing of the once handsome mansion was habitable.

Up and down a room in this wing, which served as sitting-room, library and dining-room paced Gabriel Godfrey, several days after the murder of the father of Myra Weston.

His brow was pale and clammy, and his manner nervous and anxious.

Suddenly a knock came upon the door, and there entered a man carrying a bundle of paper in his hand.

"Ah, you have come at last, Lawyer Spencer," said Gabriel, impatiently.

"Yes, I came as soon as your man told me you had returned home."

"Be seated and tell me what you have done."

"Simply tided over until your return."

"And now that I have returned?"

"If you have brought the money with you, then all will be well."

"If not?"

"You will be sold out; and more—I fear the bank will press you to the wall on the paper it holds, when it is known that the indorsements are not genuine."

"Spencer, I have returned without money, for I was disappointed in getting what I went after. I have been going it too fast in the city, I admit, and have been unlucky at every turn."

"I confessed to you just how I stood, believing that you, who owed my father so much of gratitude, would help me out; but, you say you cannot."

"No, for I am not able to pay one-fourth of what you need, Gabriel, and even what I could do would be at a great sacrifice to me."

"I have advanced you large sums, and I confess I did owe your father many favors and thus have tried to liquidate them to you."

"Well if you cannot help me all must go; but if it could be kept off a few weeks I would pay every cent."

"From your hopes of winning money?"

"No, I am to marry an heiress."

"Ah, Gabriel, I fear—"

"No lecturing me, Spencer: but say if you can keep the bounds off me for six weeks?"

"It will be impossible, for they gave me until to-morrow to settle, and the bank then presents the notes to your indorsers."

"And will find out the forgery?"

"They must."

"And I will go to jail?"

"I fear so, Gabriel."

"Sam Spencer, hold these men off for ten days and I will pay all I owe."

"In God's name, how?"

"I will go East and marry at once, for—"

The man checked himself suddenly, and his face became livid.

"But, will the lady consent, and will you, if she does, do right to use her money?"

"She will consent, and I will use her money only as a temporary arrangement."

"I will do all that I can for you, Gabriel, for from my heart I sympathize with you. Your father took me as a poor student and made me your tutor, and through his kindness I was able to see much of the world and learn men, for he kept me constantly traveling with you."

"I also was able to study law the while, and he gave me a start when I ceased to be your tutor, and his kindness secured me the practice I now have."

"He left you rich, Gabriel, but you have squandered it all, while I have been able to lay up money, and as my wife had a little inheritance we are well-to-do, but not rich."

"Still I will pay a thousand dollars more for you, to get a couple of weeks' delay, and more time, if possible."

"I will return at once, and attend to it."

"And if you meet my messenger, whom I told to remain and wait for the mail, take him back with you and send me three hundred dollars, for I must have this sum to go East and marry with."

"I will have to do it, I suppose, Gabriel," and the lawyer took his departure, leaving Gabriel Godfrey to his own meditations.

An hour or more passed, and then came the clatter of hoofs, and glancing from the window he saw his messenger, an old man who, with his wife, were the only servants that the ruined heir kept.

Soon the door opened, and the young man said, quickly:

"Did Lawyer Spencer send some money by you for me, Ross?"

"Yes, sir, three hundred dollars."

He handed over a roll of bills and a note.

Gabriel Godfrey thrust the money into his pocket uncounted, and tore open the note.

It was as follows:

"DEAR GABRIEL:—

"I have, by paying a few hundreds here and there, fifteen hundred in all, secured just thirty days' delay."

"I also send you the money asked for, and I must tell you that it cramps me to do this, but I hope it will all come right in the end."

"My advice to you is to go at once and see what can be done to save yourself from the fate that seems so hard to avoid, as I now view the situation, for if I sacrificed every dollar I have, it would not save you from prison on those forged indorsements."

"With my best wishes,

"Yours,

"SAMUEL SPENCER."

Crushing the note in his hand, he threw it into the fire, and then said angrily:

"Well, was there any mail?"

"Only this letter, sir," and Ross left the room.

Gabriel Godfrey seized the letter and broke it open.

It was the letter of Myra Weston which had followed him home so quickly.

A cry broke from his lips as he read it.

"I am lost, and my last card is played."

"She will confess who the murderer is, though she now seeks to shield me, and I will be hanged!"

"Curses on my cruel luck!"

"Hail there comes a steamer up the river—I will take it, for I have half an hour to get ready in."

He rung for Ross, and told him to go out and signal for the steamer to land, and ten minutes after, with gripsack in hand, he stood awaiting for the steamer to land.

"Be gone long, sir?" asked Ross.

"I do not know—good-by," and with a bitter laugh he sprang on the gangplank and rushed on board.

A few days after, Myra Weston, seated in her own home, brooding over her father's untimely end, and her blasted hopes, read the following from a paper she took up to try and change the current of her thoughts:

"The loss of life on the ill-fated steamer Western Belle was greater than at first supposed, for the following are the names of the dead."

Then followed a list, and among the names was that of Gabriel Godfrey, with the words:

"Mr. Godfrey had just gotten upon the steamer at his home on the river, and it was said that he was going East to be married."

"He was not seen after the explosion of the boiler, and his body was doubtless torn to atoms, as were many others."

A groan came from the lips of Myra Weston, and then the low-spoken words:

"A quick retribution—so let it be—yes, it is better so, for had he lived I would have repented of my mercy, become revengeful, and sent him to the gallows!"

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGER GIVES A WARNING.

WHO he was no one knew; but he had come into the mining-camps one pleasant Sunday afternoon like a whirlwind, and afterward had told the landlord of the "Hash House" that his name was Merl, and that he hailed from Mexico, and, as a proof that he was a foreigner, he spoke with just the slightest accent, that was rather pleasant to hear than otherwise.

His coming into the camps was unexpected, but very welcome to the miners.

He had been descried some distance off, coming along a mountain ridge that was in plain view of the hundred or more cabins in the valley, and when first seen was fairly flying along at a terrific pace, unmindful that a trip of his horse would send him into eternity.

He evidently did not know what lay before him, or he was a madman and did not care.

Every eye, and there were several hundred miners in the valley that balmy afternoon, was upon him.

"Who is he?"

That was the question of all, but no one answered.

He dashed along at the same mad rate, while yells of warning came on all sides of:

"Beware of the canyon!"

"There's death before you!"

"Hold up, hard, or you are dead!"

But, the horseman heeded not the cry, and, in another instant, was in full view of a deep chasm before him.

It was a split in the mountain, and every inch of fifteen feet wide—then down two hundred feet to death.

But he reined his horse in upon the very edge, and gazed at the death-trap an instant, while a yell went up from the mining-camps below at his unexpected escape.

But only for an instant did horse and rider seem a cast of bronze, so motionless they were, and then the horseman wheeled, rode back a short distance, and once more dashed forward toward the mountain rift.

A silence like unto death reigned in the camps below at this desperate act, and all eyes were upon the daring horseman.

They saw him crouch low in his saddle, his rein grasped well in hand, and then sink the spurs deep into the flanks of his splendid blood-red bay.

One second of suspense and the noble brute rose to the mighty leap and seemed suspended in the air above the chasm.

Then he came down upon the further side, dropped to his knees, recovered himself, and sped on, while the yells of the admiring miners made the mountains echo and re-echo again.

Down the steep, winding trail he came, and dashed into the camp at the same terrific rate.

"Men, I am here to warn you of danger, for White Wolf and his warriors are riding toward your camps to raid them.

"Arm quickly and go to the Pass in the mountains and ambush them.

"It is just three miles from here, and you have one hour to get there!"

All was at once excitement, for the renegade pale-face chief, White Wolf, the leader of the recreant red-skins, was a terror in the land.

But a voice called out:

"Who is you, pard, and where from?"

"It matters not now who I am, or where from. Find that out afterward."

"Maybe you is White Wolf's spy, and when we leave camp one way he'll come in t'other way."

A silence followed the words, for the speaker was a man but too well known in camp.

He was a desperado, a bully, who answered to the name of Dick Deadly Hand, for when he drew on a man sudden, death followed.

All eyes were upon the strange horseman, and he said quietly:

"My, friends, I surrender myself to your keeping, to see if I have not told you the truth, and you can hold me as gallows fruit until you find out.

"Then, when you set me free, as you will do, I shall make that man eat his words," and he glanced toward Dick Deadly Hand.

"You will, will you? Well—"

"Hold! wait until you have proven my words false—then I am at your service."

"That's squar, and my idee is we had better be doin' as the gent says afore it are too late," said a miner to Gold Grip Sampson, the landlord of the Hash House, and who was a man of great influence in the camps.

"That's so! Come, lads, to the Pass! to the Pass!" and the cry rung out upon all sides.

"I should like to go with you, sir, to lend a hand, if I am not to be held as a hostage to prove my words," said the stranger, addressing Gold Grip Sampson, who replied:

"And go you shall, pard, for I are your friend."

"Come, lads, who leads?"

"I does! I'll be cap'n," cried Dick Deadly Hand.

"Permit me to offer my services, if you care to trust me," and the stranger rode forward.

A cheer greeted his words, and Dick Deadly Hand muttered:

"You kin lead, but I'll be nigh yer, if yer plays false, and yer'll find me when yer gits back ter camp, too, my game-cock."

The stranger now rode forward with Landlord Sampson, whose horse had been brought to him by one of the servants of his hotel, and soon after, three hundred well-mounted, well-armed men set out for the pass in the mountains, three miles distant.

It was the very place to lie in ambush, and scouts sent ahead at a run were there to report as the force rode up that a large band of Indian horsemen were winding around the trail on the mountain-side.

The stranger placed his men in position, with their horses back behind a ridge, and, soon after, the Indians came in sight.

It was just sunset, and it was evidently the intention of the chief to camp at the Pass for several hours, and then dash down upon the camps by the valley trails.

The order was given to camp on the trail, and just then came the ringing command:

"Fire!"

Rifles and revolvers rung out, and red-skins and mustangs bit the dust.

To surprise had been White Wolf's intention, and when surprised, he could but retreat, for the volley told him that he had a large force to deal with, and perhaps he had been flanked.

So, in wild confusion, the red-skin cavalry turned and fled, carrying off some wounded and a few dead, and mounting, the miners gave hot chase.

But night soon fell upon the scene, and the larger force of miners returned to Last Chance, as the mining-camps had been named, not inappropriately by the first miners who had visited the valley and knew that it was sink or swim with them.

The stranger had gone with Landlord Sampson to the Hash House, and been given the best room in that establishment, and as he entered the social hall, later, on that night, he was greeted with three rousing cheers, followed by the words:

"Is you lookin' fer me, pard, fer I is jist starvin' to eat them words o' mine you was goin' ter feed me on?"

The speaker was Dick Deadly Hand, and he held a revolver covering the heart of the stranger.

CHAPTER IV.

"LAST CHANCE."

LAST CHANCE was a mining-camp pure and unadulterated.

It had not "panned out" in sufficient quantities to set people wild, but the miners that worked got a handsome sum for their labor, and business was always brisk.

There were other camps down the valley, but Last Chance was the center of attention, and was noted for its half-dozen good stores, blacksmith shop and "hotel," which last was kept by Landlord Sampson.

He had won the name of "Gold Grip Sampson," because all he took hold of made money for him, and he had, with a very proper appreciation of his establishment, bestowed upon it the name of Hash House.

Sampson had come West to make a fortune, and his daughter, Stella, a young girl of eighteen, and a very beautiful girl, had come out to Last Chance to make it her home also.

The Hash House, under her influence, was much better than it otherwise would have been, and there was not a man in the camp that did not worship Stella Sampson.

Back on the hillside from the hotel she and her father had their cabin home of four rooms, and no one dared intrude there.

Each day she was wont to receive wild flowers, specimens of gold-dust and "ore," and many other little souvenirs the miners picked up in the mountains.

She knew every mine, and was wont to ride alone often through the mountains and valleys.

Her father had told her of the stranger's arrival, and hinted that Dick Deadly Hand intended to make trouble for him, he feared.

That night Stella had looked in through the window, when the stranger went in to supper, and she saw a man six feet in height, straight as a soldier, and with the bearing of one.

He was dressed in the garb of a Mexican caballero, and his black hair was worn long, falling upon his broad shoulders.

He had a mustache, with long silken ends, and his face was one to see and remember, so handsome was it in every feature.

"How handsome! who can he be?"

"His is a face to ruin hearts—yes, and to break them," so murmured pretty Stella Sampson, as she stood gazing at the distinguished-looking Mexican, and she gave a sigh as though the one glance she had gotten into his dark, brilliant eyes, large and sorrowful in expression,

had touched her little heart, which so far had been fancy free, though many feared that handsome Dick Deadly Hand would some day carry out his threat to make her his wife.

Last Chance was certainly a lawless place.

There was not a week that several men did not "die with their boots on," and gambling and drinking seemed to be really the industries of the camps.

The "Live and Let Live Saloon" was the favorite rendezvous in the valley, and Boss Sampson was the proprietor of it also.

It was a gambling den and drinking saloon combined, and would accommodate a couple of hundred people at a time.

The bar was built of logs, and had no opening on the saloon side, so that it looked like a miniature fort, and there were exits by means of the cellar, so that if besieged the "gin-slingers," as the bartenders were called, could make a quick and safe retreat.

This was an idea of Gold Grip Sampson, and he kept a perfect arsenal behind the bar ready for use, while he never employed an attendant who was not "full of sand," "on the shoot," and ready to "chip in" when called on.

And Gold Grip's orders to his men were explicit:

"Don't be bullied, and put a man out to save trouble; while, that he may not feel offended at being fired, kill him first."

This advice he gave, and set the example himself, so that even the desperadoes of Last Chance knew that the Live and Let Live Saloon was not the place to bully the landlord.

There were other "hotels" and other saloons in Last Chance, but the establishments of which Gold Grip Sampson was the "boss," had the call on popularity and style.

The Hash House was not a mean place either, for its rooms, though small, were clean, and a cot bed was in each one, with the brook outside for a wash-basin.

Every miner was expected to furnish his own blankets and towels, but the hotel furnished a worn, fine-straw pillow, cot, knives, forks, and dishes, with plenty of substantial food, for there was no French cook at "Sampson's," and it was lucky for the cook there was not.

There were some rooms furnished for strangers, as there was a weekly stage in and out of the place, that sometimes carried "tenderfeet from the East."

One of these rooms had been assigned to the stranger, and he found that it was by no means uncomfortable.

His worldly possessions he had with him in a horse, saddle, bridle, weapons and a pair of well-filled saddle-bags.

He unpacked his things as though he had come to stay, and made his room look quite cozy, while upon the shelf under the small mirror he placed a few toilet articles, a razor and cup, comb, brush and tooth-brush; and some towels.

Having arranged his toilet with much care he went in to supper, which had been delayed for the return of the miners from their attack on the red-skins.

He ate heartily, lighted a cigar and strolled into the saloon, to be greeted by the cheers of those present and the words of Dick Deadly Hand.

Stella Sampson had, after seeing him at the supper-table, gone into the office and looked at the register.

She saw there simply the following:

"MERL—Mexico."

It told her nothing more than that he was a Mexican, and the writing was almost delicate enough to have been written by a feminine hand.

Then Stella had gone along the path toward her own quarters, and which led her by the open windows of the Live and Let Live Saloon. Suddenly she halted, for the words of Dick Deadly Hand came to her ears.

As the desperado spoke he had covered the stranger with his revolver.

But the one thus under the revolver's muzzle did not flinch as he turned and faced the desperado amid a breathless silence speaking:

"I told you, sir, I would make you eat your words."

"I have proven that I spoke the truth, and if you were a true man you would retract your insult flung upon me."

"I'm a true man, and yet I retracts nothin'."

"You was to make me eat my words, so just do so, pard."

It was evident to all that Dick Deadly Hand had chosen his position with a view to trouble.

His back was to a window that was open, and he faced his man and the crowd in the saloon, so could see every movement.

He was a splendid looking fellow, strong as a lion, quick as a panther and handsome withal, though ignorant.

He dressed better than any miner in camp, oiled his hair and beard and wore a white shirt every Sunday.

He was a deadly shot, a desperate hand with the knife, and besides his great strength made him feared by all, for there was no one in the camp who cared to cross him.

He certainly felt that no one would dare do so now, where it was a fair fight between himself and the stranger.

"I did not expect to face a coward, sir, so you drew on me before I saw you and I am at your mercy; but if you will fight me a fair duel I will meet you now with any weapons you may select."

In the hush that was upon the room, every word of the stranger was distinctly heard, and a number of voices echoed the cry of one man:

"That's fair and squar", Dick.

"This is my fight, pards, not yourn, so don't chip in on my little game."

"This fine pilgrim said as how he meant to make me take back what I said, and so I tells him now to jist draw and toss me a bullet ter chew on, as a kind o' appetizer to them words I has got ter eat."

"Draw, stranger, and sail in."

There was not a man present who did not know that if the stranger made the slightest movement toward drawing a weapon, he would fall dead that instant in his tracks, for Dick Deadly Hand was not the man to miss his aim.

CHAPTER V.

SOME ONE "CHIPS IN."

NOT a muscle of the stranger's face moved, as he stood there facing the muzzle of Dick Deadly Hand's revolver.

He showed not the slightest sign of fear.

If he knew, and he could not but know, that the bully would kill him, he did not show that he feared death.

Not an appealing look did he give toward the miners.

He was a stranger, there in the midst of men whose cabin, he had saved from the torch of the red-skin, whose gold, the result of hard toil, he had kept them from being robbed of, and whose lives in fact he had saved, and yet no one seemed to be his friend.

If he had a friend there, that one was afraid to spring to his side and face the feared and desperate Deadly Hand.

But the stranger made no appeal; he did not flinch; he simply looked into the muzzle of the revolver as though deciding just what he would do.

A handsome pair of pearl-handled revolvers, silver mounted, were in his belt, along with a long, ugly-looking knife, which the sash he wore but half concealed.

His lips were closed over a cigar, and blue curls of smoke went upward, showing that he smoked leisurely in spite of his danger.

His hands hung to his side, and a movement of them would have been the signal for his death.

"He's cool as ice," said one, in a whisper.

"Yes, he's grit to ther bone."

"Got sand to throw to ther winds."

"Looks as tho' he were takin' Dick's pictur'."

"He's dead, sart'in, ef he winks."

"We oughter call a halt, pards."

"We'd git cold lead if we did."

Such were the whispered words that went around, yet were hardly heard.

"Does yer throw yer hands up, stranger, and back down, for I hain't standin' here ter be photographed?" said Dick Deadly Hand.

"Up with your hands, Dick Desmond, or I'll kill you!" and, with the ringing words, Stella Sampson leaped through the window, her revolver leveled at the desperado, and her face pale and determined.

All in Last Chance knew that Stella Sampson could hit "dead center," every time.

She was noted, too, for her reckless riding, as well as her use of revolver and rifle, for she was wont often to supply the Hash House table with game.

She had once leveled a revolver at a miner who was impudent to her, and made him beg her pardon, which he promptly did, so it was known that she was not one to trifle with.

Dick Desmond loved her desperately, and he had vowed to himself if she did not marry him, she should never become the wife of any other man.

Stella rather liked the bold fellow, but she did not love him, and yet her manner of coquetry led him to believe that she did.

Now, to see her suddenly spring in through the window, and cover him with a revolver, almost wholly unnerved him.

Seeing her do what not one in the crowd had dared do, the miners broke forth in a wild yell, which added to Dick Deadly Hand's confusion.

"Up with your hands, I say; I will stand no nonsense," repeated the girl.

"What does yer want, Stella?"

"Just what I say."

"You has no right to chip in here."

"I have a right, when you take a man at a disadvantage, and have not the manhood in you to acknowledge you were wrong, after his warning saved us all, as it did."

"He was going to make me eat my words, he said."

"He gave you the chance to beg his pardon."

"I beg no man's pardon."

"Then that shows the brute in your nature! Up with your hands, I say!"

"I won't."

"So help me God, I'll kill you, Dick Desmond, if you do not obey."

All knew that she meant just what she said.

"Permit me to arrange this affair," and Merl the Mexican stepped forward.

"That man must first obey me, then you can have your say, sir," and Stella stepped nearer to the desperado, while the stranger bowed politely and stood still, yet did not take advantage of the situation to draw a weapon.

"The girl will kill you, Dick, so you had better obey, as you would if a man commanded you to," warned Landlord Sampson now coming forward, for one of his men had gone to call him.

"I will kill you, Dick Deadly Hand, if you do not obey! Up with your hands, I say!" and Stella's revolver covered the head of the desperado, while a breathless silence reigned in the saloon.

"Well, I does it, but that pilgrim will find I hain't done with him yet."

A perfect yell greeted these words of the desperado.

He had yielded, and to a girl, for his hands went quickly above his head.

Then Stella said:

"Dick Desmond, you may find that the stranger is not done with you; but there is to be no trouble now, in my presence, or I will chip in again."

"Now, sir, what were you going to say?" and lowering her weapon she turned toward the stranger.

He bowed in his courtly way and said:

"Permit me, young lady, to thank you for helping me out of an ugly scrape, and to congratulate you upon your nerve."

"I did not wish to begin my life in Last Chance by getting into trouble, but that bully has forced it upon me."

"I was coming here, to seek a home, when I, from a hiding-place, heard the plot of the red-skins to surprise Last Chance, so I rode hither with all speed to warn you."

"Now let me arrange with this man," and the stranger turned to Dick Desmond.

His words had been heard by all and were well received. It was evident that he had made a good impression, and whether he could hold it depended entirely upon how he dealt with the desperado miner.

Not a soul present had blamed him for not attempting to draw a weapon, when under the muzzle of Dick Deadly Hand's revolver, and certainly he had met the danger with marked coolness and fearlessness.

Men of his race, if he was a Mexican as he said, were not popular in that part of the country, but then he had come with the intention of settling there and he had rendered them a great service.

His plan of meeting the red-skins had proved successful, and his taking a leap on horseback which no man in Last Chance had looked upon as possible, had shown that he possessed marvelous nerve.

He was a handsome fellow, looked the perfect gentleman, was courtly in his manners as though in a drawing-room, and possessed a velvety softness of demeanor that was womanly in its tenderness, and yet there was thought to be a heart of iron beneath the velvet exterior.

Now every eye was upon him, while Dick Deadly Hand faced him with a look of intensest hatred on every feature.

He had sought to bully the stranger from the start, and thus add new laurels to his name as a desperate character, and that he had been humiliated through him, and by Stella, had made him almost demon-like in his fury.

The fact that Stella Sampson had saved the Mexican from his death-shot infuriated him, and he intended that it should be a fight to the bitter end and between them, or the stranger should have to fly ignominiously out of the camps.

He must redeem his character, of having been out-braved by a woman, and so he turned to hear what the Man from Mexico had to say.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN FROM MEXICO.

WITHOUT any show of anger, excitement, or a desire to curry favor, the Man from Mexico, as the miners had already dubbed the stranger, turned to Dick Deadly Hand.

His words were not spoken in the loud tone of the bravado, but softly, and yet all heard them, his utterance was so distinct, notwithstanding his foreign accent.

"Your name is Dick Desmond, I believe, for so I think this lady called you?"

"Yes, and it are Dick Deadly Hand, too, and I guess the boys christened me because they know'd what I c'u'd do."

"Doubtless they did, Mr. Dick Desmond of the Deadly Hand, for bordermen generally know what they are about," was the cool rejoinder.

"What might be your name, pilgrim?"

"My name is Merl, and I am from Mexico."

"Got too hot for you thar?"

"Yes, I like this climate better; but, let us not waste words but come to business."

"I are your man, be it revolver, rifle or knife!"

"Do you gamble, Mister Deadly Hand?"

"I does, and I plays as I shoots—to win."

"Ah! I am glad to hear it, for I am a gambler."

"Now, be yer? Waal, I are the trump keerd o' this pack; hain't I, pards?"

A general assent was given to this, which being interpreted was to the effect that Dick Deadly Hand was the "boss player" in Last Chance.

To this many present could testify from sad experience.

In truth there were many who believed that the bully played a false game, so incessant were his winnings.

"I have a game to propose with you then," resumed the stranger.

"We has a game of another kind now, pard."

"We can make it to suit the game of cards, for I propose to play you for your life or mine."

"Ther devil!"

Dick Deadly Hand uttered the exclamation with great vehemence, while all now grew silent with the intense interest of the situation.

"I will tell you what we will do."

"Here is my revolver. It is loaded. I'll put it on this table, and along with it one thousand dollars to add a pecuniary interest to the game; then we will play one game to win, or best two in three, or best three in five, just as you please, and the winner takes the stakes."

"The revolver and the money?"

"Yes; and the principal stake."

"And what are that?" asked Dick Deadly Hand with growing interest.

"The life of the loser!" was the cool response of the Man from Mexico.

"Does yer mean that ther loser o' ther game loses his life?"

"That is it, exactly."

"Who shoots him?"

"The winner, of course."

"Durnation!"

It was evident from the exclamation of Dick Deadly Hand that he liked not the arrangement.

"Why can't we draw and hev it out?"

"Because you may be a bad shot and injure others, and, besides, anybody can enjoy a draw and fire fight; but you pride yourself upon your nerve and your card-playing, and I tell you I am a gambler."

"Then, too, our friends here would be better entertained by a game for life and death."

"Do you play, or do you back down, after all your bluster, and thus eat your words?"

There was something so polite and calm in the manner of the stranger, so free from bravado, that he won the admiration of all present, and voice after voice called out:

"It's a square deal, Dick."

"Play him ther game, Deadly Hand."

"Yas, ther game let it be."

"Yer can't back down now, Dick."

"Yer has some trick in this, or yer wouldn't be so durned cool in proposin' it," said the desperado, not half-liking it, yet convinced that he had to face the ordeal or lose his prestige in Last Chance; and to back down from any proposition, especially before Stella Sampson, was not to be thought of for an instant.

But he wanted to gain time, hoping some one would come to his relief with another proposition, so he accused the stranger of wishing to play him a trick.

"There is no trick, and you can watch for one, as I will, and if I catch you playing any, or cheating, I shall kill you on the instant, as you can me," was the reply.

"Squar' ag'in," called out a voice, and the words were greeted with a cheer.

"I are ready ter meet yer, pard, I don't care when or how; but this looks like a one-sided game."

"It is, for the winner does the killing; but I will leave it to this lady if it is not as fair for one as the other?"

"Just as fair, sir," responded Stella, who was leaning against the bar, an interested spectator and listener to all that was said and done.

"Waal, I has a pack o' keerds here, and I guesses my word are good for the gold."

"Your word is good for nothing with me, sir, so put up your gold, as I shall—here!"

As the Man from Mexico spoke he unbuckled a belt from about his waist, and took from it fifty twenty-dollar gold-pieces, which he placed upon the table, and laid his pistol there also.

The miners also noted that the thousand dollars was by no means all he had in the belt, for more gold was there, and rolls of bills, too.

They now took a better look at his "get-up" too, as he stood full under the lamps in the saloon.

His velvet jacket was bordered around with gold pieces of a peso in value, and his hat was fringed with the same, while the cord that incircled it was ten-dollar pieces buckled together.

Adown his pantaloons seams were two rows of the same valuable trimming, while his spurs were of solid gold.

Then it was seen that his shirt was of silk, and in the black scarf, tied in a sailor's knot, glittered a large diamond, while upon the small finger

of his left hand was a brilliant ruby to match it in size.

He wore a blue sash of silk, and beneath it was his gold-belt, which also served for his weapons.

The latter, a pair of revolvers and long-bladed knife, were of the finest kind and gold mounted.

His form was perfect, his hands and feet extremely small, and he looked dangerous in spite of his rather dandified appearance and make-up.

He wore a watch, with a chain about his neck formed of small gold-pieces, and in fact his costume and outfit were worth a small fortune.

As he faced the desperado now, it was seen that his hat was looped up on the left side by a pin representing an ace of diamonds.

The card was of ivory, and the diamond ace was formed of rubies.

In the excitement of his coming, and what followed, it had not been particularly noticed how he was attired, and besides, after his return to the Hash House he had arranged his costume and toilet with exceeding care.

As Dick Deadly Hand now had a good look at him, he said:

"Waal, my Mexican dandy, I'll jist ruffle your fine feathers, fer yer, so here goes fer ther game, and I'll see thet yer fun'ral expenses is paid and yer has a good send-off frum Hallelujah Hill," the last being the name of the cemetery of Last Chance.

As the bully spoke he seated himself at the table and threw down a pack of cards.

"One moment, sir."

"Waal, Mexico?"

"You are to match my money there with a like sum, and your cards are not the ones to be used in our little game."

"Waal, I kin match yer dust."

"Gold Grip, jist put down a thousand thar fer me, fer you has my dust."

"Certainly, Dick," and the landlord, who was the banker for a number of the miners, called to one of his bartenders to get the sum named.

The truth was Dick Desmond wished to keep his gold in Sampson's hands, that he might know how well off he was and not refuse his daughter to him on account of poverty.

The money was placed on the table, and Dick Deadly Hand said:

"Now, come, fer ther game."

"Not with those marked cards," was the quiet reply of the Man from Mexico, and he pointed to the pack which the desperado had placed upon the table.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GAME.

"LOOK a-heur, stranger, hain't yer goin' it jist a leetle too strong, ter accuse me o' cheatin', fer ter play with marked cards are thet?"

"Your cards are marked, and I'll prove it by showing the marks," was the reply of the Man from Mexico.

Dick Deadly Hand turned slightly pale at this, for he saw Stella step forward to pick up the pack, and he quickly said:

"Waal, I hain't no wish ter quarrel with a man who may be said ter be livin' his last few minutes o' life, so I'll git a new pack."

"Will you kindly procure a pack for us, senorita?" and the Mexican turned to Stella, who called to one of the bartenders to give her a fresh pack of cards, and then she glanced earnestly over those she held in her hand, and which the stranger had said were marked.

"I see no mark on these, sir," she said.

"It is plain to me, senorita—do you notice the lines on the back, which seem to be merely fancy work, show by examination just what card each one is."

For full a minute did Stella look ere she discovered the puzzle, but suddenly it flashed before her eyes, and with a look at the miner she thrust the pack into her pocket.

"If thar is any mark on them cards, I don't know it, and you sha'n't hold me up afore my pard as a thief, fer—"

"Hands off that revolver, sir!"

The words rung out stern and sharp now, and this time the stranger held the miner at his mercy.

"The table is ready, sir, and I am waiting to play the game."

"Here is my gold, as you see, and my revolver lies with it."

"And thar is my dust, and my weepson covers it," and Dick Deadly Hand placed his revolver upon his pile of gold.

The cards were handed to the Mexican by Stella, and glancing at them quickly he said:

"These are all right, senorita."

"Now, sir, do you understand the terms of this game?"

"The one who wins gits the dust, and takes up his revolver and shoots the t'other."

"The winner gets the gold, and the loser stands yonder against that window."

"The senorita gives the word, if she will be so kind, and the winner shoots the loser, and pays burial expenses."

"I are willin'," said Dick Desmond, but his voice was not as full of confidence as was usual with him.

His having to play with other cards than his own seemed to have discouraged him.

"I will not act, sir, but my father will," said Stella, and the landlord stepped forward, when the Mexican said:

"I give you my belt of arms, sir, and this man must also give up his."

"Then please hold your revolver ready, and should either cheat or the loser attempt to take his weapon from the table, be good enough to kill him."

There was something so cool in the manner of the Mexican that he won the admiration of all.

He was a stranger, but he had money, and more, he had grit.

He had come well mounted, thoroughly armed and he had rendered a great service to all in the camps.

He was handsome, fearless-faced, and had a certain fascination of manner about him that was irresistible.

On the other hand, Dick Deadly Hand was feared by all.

He had ruled the camps by the fear he caused on all sides, and here was a man he had begun with, to at once get him cowed, who would not submit to the desperado's iron rule.

So all watched the result with the deepest of interest, and there was a dread silence in the saloon as the arrangements for the game were made.

The Mexican took a seat quietly, lighted a cigarette and handed the fresh pack of cards to Dick Desmond to shuffle.

Stella Sampson stood by her father's side, pale but determined.

She had helped the Man from Mexico out of an ugly scrape, and she intended to see the end of it.

Landlord Sampson held the belts of each man on his arm, and in his right hand was a revolver ready for use, should the loser attempt to break the compact, and those who knew the proprietor of the Hash House were well aware that he would use it if need be.

The crowd, silent and earnest, gathered around and under a suspense that was painful, the game was begun.

It was to be but one game, for so it had been decided, and the lookers-on felt that one of the two men must die within a few minutes.

The hands were dealt out, and the Man from Mexico, smoking his cigarette, seemed not to feel that his life was depending upon the turn of a card.

Amid a silence that could be felt the game was begun, and all could not but observe that Dick Deadly Hand was not playing with his usual reckless manner.

He was slow in his plays, and his face was pale.

The Man from Mexico looked indifferent, and that was all.

As the last card was thrown down a long breath was drawn that seemed to come from every one.

The suspense as to who was to be the victim was over.

"I have won, sir," was the quiet remark of the Mexican.

Dick Deadly Hand made no reply. His face had turned to an ashen hue.

He cast a quick glance at the landlord, but it gave him no hope, and he saw that Gold Grip would kill him if he moved his hand toward his revolver.

As though to put the temptation out of his way, Stella stepped forward and took the weapon of the desperado, as the Mexican picked up his own and the gold.

There seemed to be one ray of hope for the miner, and he clutched at it:

"If you misses me, pard?" he asked, and his voice was husky.

All awaited the answer, and Stella with the deepest interest, for she bent forward toward the Mexican.

"If I miss you, senor, you are at liberty to take your revolver and kill me," responded the Man from Mexico.

There was no hope for Dick Deadly Hand in the response.

The Mexican now rose and said sternly:

"Take your stand, sir."

Then he lighted another cigarette, and stepped to his position across the saloon, glancing at the lamps to see if the light was favorable for his deadly work.

Dick Deadly Hand was not a coward, though a bully. He had a certain pride, and he determined to face his death with courage, though he was full of hope that it would be life for him in the face of what appeared to be a sure end for him from the Mexican's bullet.

If he faced the music without a tremor, and should not die, then he would still retain his influence in Last Chance.

He smiled as he glanced at Stella, and said with an effort at indifference:

"I has got ter go, Miss Stella, but ef he misses, then I chips in fer a shot, and you knows me."

So with a swagger he stepped to the position assigned him, in front of the window, the shutters having been closed by order of Landlord Sampson.

He turned as he reached the spot, and said:

"Landlord, ef I passes in my checks, jist give Miss Stella ther dust you have o' mine. She is ther heiress ter my claim, and I says it afore all ter witness."

"No, I'll not have it," was the firm reply of Stella, and before more could be said, the Man from Mexico asked, sternly:

"Are you ready, sir?"

CHAPTER VIII.

BRANDED.

"I ARE ready ter die ef you is ready ter do ther killin', pard," was the plucky response of Deadly Hand as the Man from Mexico faced him, revolver in hand.

The Mexican glanced at him and then at Stella.

He saw that the face of the latter was very pale, and he stepped toward her and whispered something which no one else heard.

At his words her face flushed, and then stepping back to his position, the Man from Mexico raised his revolver and fired as quick as a flash.

Dick Deadly Hand started at the shot, but did not fall.

Then he called out in a voice full of savage revenge:

"Missed me, by Heaven! Now it's my chip in!"

"Hold!"

The command of the Mexican caused the hum of voices to cease, and the excitement was over in an instant.

"I did not mise you, but I cared not to kill you, so I branded you with my mark, Dick Deadly Hand, for I sent my bullet through your left ear," coolly said the Man from Mexico.

The desperado raised his hand to his ear, and it was blood-stained.

He had felt the sting of the bullet, and felt that it had clipped him, but meant to say nothing about it, that he might get his return shot at the Mexican.

This the latter had threatened by his words, and all now saw that there was a clean cut round hole in the left ear of Dick Deadly Hand.

His face paled with fury, and a cheer at the marksmanship of the stranger broke from the lips of the crowd.

Dick Deadly Hand was livid now, and said in a voice that quivered with passion:

"Yer has branded me, has yer?"

"Waal, one day yer'll git my brand on you, Man o' Mexico, and jist book what I says, fer it goes, ev'ry time."

"Good-night, gents," and taking his belt of arms from the landlord, the desperado left the saloon.

"You have made a deadly foe, sir," said the landlord, turning to the Mexican, who responded:

"I do not care, sir; but he should be thankful for his life."

"Senors, join me in a drink, for it is my treat."

This the crowd were most happy to do, and the liquor was placed before them, and the health of the Mexican was drank with a shout.

Stella had slipped out of the saloon, but not until she had said to her father that the Mexican had whispered to her:

"I will not kill him in your presence, senorita, but I shall mark his left ear."

This proved the marvelous skill of the Mexican with a revolver, and he at once became a hero among the miners.

Of his antecedents they knew nothing and cared less.

They owed him a debt of gratitude, and he had shown himself a "man from way back," as one of the miners expressed it, and so they were more than willing to acknowledge him as a ruling spirit in their midst.

Mexicans were not, as a rule, popular in the mines, but the Senor Merl had proven himself an exception to the rule, so he was at once set down as one of the outfit of Last Chance.

Having treated to drinks and cigars all around, the stranger quietly left the saloon and sought his own quarters.

As he neared the door of his room, and was leaving the yard fronting the quarters of the landlord, he heard a voice call out:

"Senor Merl."

He at once halted and doffed his sombrero as Stella Sampson glided up to him.

"Senor, I wish to tell you that you want to be on your guard against Dick Desmond, for he will strike you in the dark some time."

"I thank you, senorita, and yet I do not wish to kill him for your sake."

"And why for my sake?"

"Is he not your accepted lover?"

A ringing laugh followed, and then Stella said:

"I love Dick Desmond?"

"Why, senor, I have yet to find the man I would love."

"Ah, pardon, senorita, but I spared him because I believed you loved him."

"He made you his heiress, you know."

"Oh, yes, and professes to love me; but if my father is now the keeper of a border tavern, senor, we have not been always poor."

"My father was unfortunate East, unfor-

fortunate because his generous nature caused him to help all of his pretended friends, and he lost his fortune by their treachery.

"He came here to seek a fortune, and when I finished school I joined him in this wild land without his will.

"But here luck has changed, as the gamblers say, and he is making a fortune rapidly, and soon I hope we can go East again to our home.

"But pardon me, for I am tiring a stranger with my own affairs."

"No, no, senorita, I am more than interested in you and your affairs.

"I felt that your father had known a different life, and you seemed unused to this wild camp; but circumstances cause us to lead strange lives, at times," and the voice of the Mexican was pathetic in its sadness, and Stella Sampson felt that he too had known sorrow in the past and was a man with a history.

But she bade him good-night and went to her room.

Then the handsome face of the Mexican rose before her and she said half aloud:

"How strange that he should seem to fairly fascinate me, as he does.

"I fear I spoke too quickly in saying I had never met the man I could love.

"Ah! me, what a strange creature a woman is.

"Now who would have believed that I, of all girls, who two years ago was surrounded by luxury, could come out to this border and become utterly fearless and really love the wild life led here?"

"And then too, that I, who have refused a score of fine offers, should become interested in a handsome Mexican gambler, for such he is by his own confession.

"Five years ago, when I was fourteen, my poor father lost his fortune; but he did nobly by me and kept me at the fashionable boarding-school, while he came West to seek another fortune.

"And when rumor had it that he had 'struck it rich,' as they say out here, I had suitors galore again.

"But the spirit of daring seized upon me to come here and join dear, noble papa, and I am so fascinated with the life that I will not leave here until he goes.

"Well, it would be strange if I came out here after all to fall in love with a border desperado—ha! ha! ha!" and with a musical laugh at her, jolly Stella Sampson sought her couch, and in her dreams the handsome, daring face of the Mexican was constantly before her.

And he?

He had gone to his room, and, with a cigar between his teeth, had thrown himself into an easy-chair, and become lost in deepest meditation.

At last he murmured to himself:

"Well, I have come under good auspices, and all turns out better than I had expected.

"I shall remain in Last Chance, for there is money to be made here; yes, and more than money I find.

"Who would have thought of finding that beautiful girl in this camp?"

"Well, who that once knew me would look for me here?"

"We are strange creatures, and but the foot-balls of Fate.

"I remain here and accept my destiny, be it what it may."

CHAPTER IX.

GOLD GRIP'S ANGEL.

THOSE who saw Ross Sampson as landlord of the Hash House, and a leading spirit in Last Chance, would never have believed that a few years before he had been a wealthy gentleman of leisure, dwelling in his elegant house on the Long Island Sound.

But so he had been, for he had inherited his wealth, and had been educated abroad.

He had met, while traveling in Spain, a beautiful girl, the daughter of a Don, as proud as he was poor, and had been the guest of the old Spaniard for a couple of months, while he lay ill of fever.

The Don's daughter had been his nurse, and he had made her his wife.

For years he lived abroad, roaming about with his lovely wife, and it was in Spain that Stella was born.

When the Don died, Ross Sampson's wife was willing to go to America, and with her family jewels as her only inheritance, she had accompanied her husband.

His old home was refitted to welcome him and his wife, and for several years they lived a happy life.

But one day, when Stella was but seven years old, her mother had taken her with her in a boat, and in a fit of sudden insanity sprung with her into the sea.

A yacht was passing near, and a young man sprung overboard and rescued the child, but her mother had been drowned.

The blow was a fearful one to both the child and her father, and taking Stella with him, Ross Sampson became a rover.

He visited many lands, but at last returned to

his home and settled down, sending Stella to a fashionable boarding-school in Boston.

Ever generous, it was not long before a number of Mr. Sampson's friends called upon him for aid, and he soon found himself swamped in fortune, and when he gathered up his all from the financial wreck, he discovered that he had but a couple of thousand dollars left.

One-fourth of this he took for himself, and started for the West to find a fortune, while the balance he devoted to Stella's education.

Loving her father devotedly, and hearing from him regularly for his strange life and success, Stella had, when she graduated, after a short round of pleasure in society, taken the train for the far West.

Her father was reported to have found an enormous fortune in the mines, and suitors she had by the score, some of whom loved her for herself, for she was very beautiful and a most fascinating girl, but others had wished to win her as the heiress to a million of money.

Out to the West she had gone, and one day had surprised her father by arriving in the stage-coach.

He had been pleased at her devotion, but wished her to return at once.

But she was firm in her resolution to remain, and said:

"Father, I know that you are doing well, but are not the millionaire people say you are.

"In a couple of years you will have made money enough to return East, buy back the old home, and live as you once did; but not now can you do so, and I will remain here with you and aid you all in my power.

"I like this wild life, and the men will all treat me with respect, for I shall command it, while I can amuse myself flirting with the handsome young miners.

"You can build us quarters back yonder on the hill, and I will beautify them, and it will not take me long to become a dead-shot, and a fine horsewoman I am already, so do not argue against my remaining."

"But, my child, these people are half civilized, desperate, and a life of danger is ever before me.

"I can chime in with their humor, but you, ah! it must not be thought of."

"But it must be, and I'll chime in, and chip in too, see if I don't."

"Why, I'll talk border slang like a native before the month is out, and no one will ever mistake me for a tenderfoot, but think I was born in a mining-camp.

"No use to argue, father, for here I remain, and what I say goes."

The landlord laughed at the slang which Stella had already picked up, and consented for her to remain, for he knew she would be a joy to his heart and also have a great influence over the wild spirits of Last Chance.

The next day, when it became known that Stella was to live in Last Chance, the miners all struck work in the mines and built the cabin back on the hillside near the hotel, laid out the grounds, and made all as comfortable as was possible for her home.

The landlord ordered a couple of wagon-loads of luxuries out there, and the miners vied with each other in making various pieces of furniture for the lovely girl, whom they baptized in various drinks as "Gold Grip's Angel."

In a short while Stella felt perfectly at home in the new life she had entered upon.

She rode horseback at will through the camp, and became the idol of the miners.

She learned to shoot with rifle and revolver, and her superb riding was the admiration of all.

Not a miner was there in camp who did not love her, and she had a kind word for all.

One man, it is true, a hanger-on about the camps, had offered her a hundred dollars for a kiss one day, and she had brought her riding whip across his face with a stinging blow that left its mark.

Then she had leveled her revolver at him and driven him before her out of the camps.

The miners had assembled, and the insulter would have been strung up to a tree, but Stella protected him and told him to leave Last Chance and never show his face there again.

This the fellow did, but not until he had made a threat that he would not forget the maiden, and the look that accompanied his words Stella never forgot.

Thus nearly two years had gone by since the idol of Last Chance had come to dwell there, and she had learned to like the wild, dangerous life, yet would be willing to leave whenever her father felt that he had made money enough to enable him to live as he had in former years.

And Ross Sampson was prospering daily.

His hotel paid him handsomely, the saloon was a mine for him, and then he had bought several claims which he had miners working for him on shares and they were panning out well.

He had sent money East and bought back his old home, and he had invested considerable gold in New York real estate which was increasing steadily in value.

"Let me remain six months longer, Stella, and I will have reached the sum I inherited.

"Then we will live a life of luxury for the re-

mainder of our lives," the landlord had said to his daughter, and she was willing to remain, though naturally she often longed for the life of exile to end.

She knew her power, she was not insensible of her beauty, and she hoped to reign as a queen some day where, when her father had lost his fortune, the cold shoulder had been turned upon him by the very ones whom his generosity had saved from ruin.

There was a spice of revenge in the nature of Ross Sampson, and his daughter had inherited it.

And so it was—as the time was drawing near for the wild life of Sampson and his daughter to come to an end, that the Man from Mexico put in an appearance at Last Chance, and if he had saved the home and riches of the landlord, Stella had returned the favor by saving him from a death-wound at the hands of Dick Desmond.

CHAPTER X.

A GAMBLER BY PROFESSION.

FROM the night of his game of cards with Dick Deadly Hand, the Man from Mexico became an object of curiosity and admiration in Last Chance.

He had been discussed after leaving the saloon by one and all, and men had wondered how he would meet Dick Desmond again.

The latter's pluck, when facing death, had still held for him his prestige, though there were many who had feared him who felt glad to know that he had met one man who had proven his master.

The next day at breakfast the Mexican had appeared as serene as a May morn.

He had enjoyed his meal, lighted a cigar, and then took a walk about the camps.

Everywhere he was spoken to with respect, and on several occasions bluntly complimented upon his nerve.

He returned to the Hash House, and was met by Landlord Sampson, who greeted him pleasantly, and asked:

"Think of locating in Last Chance, sir?"

"Yes, I have come to stay."

"Going to buy a claim, sir, or prospect for gold?"

"No; I have come to make money, but not by purchase of a claim or prospecting."

"I fear you will find it hard to do in these camps, Senor Merl?"

"No, for I made a thousand last night, you remember?"

"Ah, yes—by gambling."

"Yes, I am a professional man."

"We need them here, sir; or, at least a doctor, and a lawyer or two to decide legal cases that come up."

"I belong to neither of those professions, Landlord Sampson."

"Ah! you hardly look like a preacher," and the landlord was trying all he could to place his man.

He admired his striking appearance, was enthusiastic over his pluck and deadly aim, and liked him for the service he had rendered in saving the people of Last Chance from being plundered by White Wolf, the Renegade.

"No, I do not preach, I practice.

"I am a gambler by profession, Senor Sampson."

"Ah!"

At last the landlord knew his guest.

He was, he admitted, a gambler by profession.

"I might have known it," he muttered to himself, and then said aloud:

"Well, sir, we play heavily here in Last Chance, and have some good men with cards."

"Dick Deadly Hand is about your best, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is the most dangerous man to play against, and he wins two out of every three games, and always wins when there is a large sum at stake, while when he loses the amount is small, and so people have thought he cheated."

"He has cheated, sir, for I recognized the cards he had as having been marked."

"Yes, my daughter and myself looked over them this morning and saw it for ourselves, but until you showed her the clever mark on them, she would never have suspected it.

"But do you think Dick knew of it?"

"Certainly, for he turned pale the very moment he saw I would not play with his cards.

"Where do you get your cards, landlord?"

"Now I come to think of it, I bought a lot from a man who was Dick Deadly Hand's friend."

The gambler smiled in a significant way, and replied:

"That is proof of his being a cheat; but he will never use marked cards in a game with me."

"Then you expect to play him again?"

"Why not, for I have no quarrel with him, and do not see why he should have with me.

"We played for a stake and he lost, and had I done so I hardly believe he would have given me my life."

"I am very sure of it."

"He accused me of being treacherous, and I meant that he should retract, or meet me, and

so why should there be more trouble between us on the old score?"

"Desmond is a revengeful devil, senior, and I warn you against him."

"Thank you, senior; but may I ask who owns the cabin yonder on that rocky point?" and the Mexican motioned toward a jutting ridge that came out into the valley a quarter of a mile away.

"I own it, sir, but no one will live there."

"I bought it of a man who was in hard luck, and sent the money for him to his mother, as he was hanged."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and the four owners before him were hanged, strange to say, so that it is known as Doomed Man's Den."

"That is odd; but is it for sale?"

"Yes, but no one will buy it."

"I will, sir, so name your price," responded the Mexican.

"My dear sir, let me tell you that though I am not superstitious, I really think that place a house of ill-omen."

"The first owner was the man who discovered gold in this range, and named these camps Last Chance."

"He was too lazy to work, so watched where others hid their gold, laid his plans, robbed them and fled."

"He was pursued and captured, and the miners hanged him to a piece of timber which projected over the point there where you see his cabin stands."

"Then a stranger came along and took the cabin, and he was hanged for horse-stealing."

"The third man was a fellow whom we all liked, but he proved to be a spy for the Devil's Dozen, as you have heard the mounted robbers of the gold trails called doubtless."

"I have heard of the Devil's Dozen, Mr. Sampson, but I am from Mexico, you know, so have little knowledge of your country up here and its people."

"Judging from what has already happened, you will not be long in getting acquainted," was the laconic response, and then the Mexican asked:

"And the next owner of the cabin?"

"Ah yes, he was a gambler and was caught cheating with marked cards, so the boys took him out one night and hanged him."

"They did not mean to kill him, but to frighten him into giving back all the money he had won by cheating."

"And he would not?"

"Either he would not, or the boys did not let him down soon enough, for he died."

"And Number Five, for you said that was the number of men who had owned the cabin I believe?"

"Yes, there were five of them and all hanged."

"And more they are all buried right by the cabin, for the men of Last Chance are superstitious about burying a hanged man in the Hallelujah Roost as we call our graveyard on the hill."

"A fitting name for the cemetery surely," said the Mexican with a smile, and he added:

"But why was Number Five hanged?"

"He had been a road-agent, taking to a life of outlawry to get money to send home, he said, and one day struck it rich here in the camps, so gave up his lawless life and turned honest."

"But he was recognized by Dick Deadly Hand, who had been robbed one day on the Overland coach by this man, so nothing would suit but hanging him, and though I did all in my power to save the poor fellow up he went."

"He gave me his money and he had laid by some thousands, and I wrote to his mother and sent it to her, telling her he had met with an accident that caused his death."

"Yes, such accidents are frequent," was the dry response, and then the Man from Mexico added:

"Well, Senior Sampson, name your price for the cabin, graves and all, for I go there to live."

"Against all I can say, sir?"

"Yes, I have no superstitious dread."

"Will you not accept it from me, sir, for you saved me heavy losses by the warning you brought us?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Sampson, I never accept a favor from any man, though I owe your daughter the debt of my life."

"I will buy the cabin, sir."

"Then call it a couple of hundred, sir."

"Here is the money," and the sum was counted out and the papers drawn up which made the Man from Mexico the owner of the cabin known as Doomed Man's Den.

CHAPTER XI.

COME TO STAY.

To one who had known Ross Sampson in his palmy days of wealth, when his elegant mansion and free-and-easy nature won the admiration of all his friends, they would have been taken aback to see what a change border-life had made in him.

His loss of fortune, through those whom he had had trusted, had embittered him to a cer-

tain extent, but he had nobly gone to work in the mines, when he found himself left a poor man by the fraud of others.

A man who had traveled over the greater part of the world, and had been noted for his refinement, took his pick and shovel and went to work in a mine without a murmur.

Then he had gotten hold of the hotel, through the failure of a brother miner, and had bought out the Live and Let Live Saloon, in which he saw a speedy way to earn a fortune.

He had adapted himself to the people and his surroundings, dropping into the odd dialect and forcible slang of the mining-camps at times, and showing a pluck and energy that made his influence felt at all times.

He had never sought a quarrel, and always was on the side of peace, but when forced to act he did so with a promptness that won the day, and his courage was undaunted, his aim deadly.

No man sought his aid in vain, and yet he had had an experience in the past which had taught him a good lesson and he was not to be cheated or trifled with.

Had he suspected the coming of Stella, he would have left the camps at a tremendous sacrifice to prevent it; but she had surprised him, and she had at once adapted herself to circumstances and he was glad that she had come before she had been two weeks in Last Chance.

She had a refining influence that soon showed itself in the camps.

Oaths were not as frequent, and there was a hush upon the gatherings in the Live and Let Live Saloon that had never been known before.

The cabins were "spruced up" too, and young miners put on a more dressy air and were even anxious to appear well in the eyes of the Idol of Last Chance.

Such was the situation at the camps into which the Man from Mexico had come.

Dick Desmond was the acknowledged champion, and he was proud of his reputation as a desperado.

His vanity prevented his seeing that a refined, lovely girl such as was Stella Sampson had nothing in common with an ignorant bully such as he was.

He had always won favor from his good looks, with maidens who were unable to detect his ignorance and vanity, and he supposed, from Stella's kind treatment of him, that she loved him.

In fact he could not well see how she could help it, when he looked at himself in the glass and thought of what a hero he was.

Her coming to the rescue of the Mexican was a terrible blow to him, and he had shown the cloven foot of his nature at once.

But he had passed through the ordeal he had to face without flinching, and only hoped that some man might attempt to guy him on his having had to back down before a woman, for he would quickly gain any prestige he had lost by at once making the unfortunate joker a victim of his anger.

Having left the saloon he went to his room to brood over the fact that he had a rival in the camps in the Man from Mexico.

When he came into the saloon the next evening all eyes were upon him, and a hush fell upon the scene.

The Man from Mexico was not present, and this Dick Deadly Hand discovered at a glance.

How would he act? Would he renew the quarrel upon the appearance of the Mexican in the saloon?

No one knew, for all day Dick Desmond had worked in his mine and only a few had seen him.

When he came in the saloon the Mexican was the subject of conversation.

All wondered at the purchase he had made of the cabin known as the Doomed Man's Den.

The landlord had told how he had given him its history, and yet the Mexican had bought it.

Then he had gone in search of a couple of carpenters in the mining-camps and put them at once to work upon the cabin to fit it up to suit his own comfort and pleasure.

He had also ordered a log cabin built in the rear for a couple of horses, and had made a purchase of the best horse in Last Chance that afternoon, paying the owner's price without a word.

So it looked as though the Mexican had come to stay, and many noted that Dick Deadly Hand's brow clouded as he heard of what his rival had done.

But when asked by a miner what he thought of the Man from Mexico having bought Doomed Man's Den, the desperado said with a laugh:

"He's his own master, pard, and kin do as he likes; but thar hain't nary man lived in thet cabin yit thet hain't gone ter glory with a rope around his neck, and maybe ther nex' won't be no exception."

As if to carry out the old adage of one's appearing when spoken of, just then the Mexican entered the saloon and alone.

His eagle eyes swept the faces before him,

and he saw Dick Deadly Hand, yet appeared not to do so.

The latter's face flushed slightly as he saw the Mexican and he put his hand down under the table, as though to have them near a weapon, if needed.

The Mexican carried his sombrero in his hand, and walked on to a seat near Dick Deadly Hand.

Suddenly, as though his eyes had just fallen upon him he said pleasantly:

"Ah, good-evening, Senior Desmond."

"Do you feel in a humor to gamble to-night, and will you and your friends make up a little game?"

These words were distinctly heard, and they seemed to prove that the Mexican felt no ill will and was ready to forget what had occurred the night before.

All was deep silence, awaiting the response of the desperado.

Would he make some insulting response, that would bring on another scene?

It would be just like him, all knew who were aware of what his nature was.

But to the surprise of all, Dick Deadly Hand replied:

"Good-evening, Pard o' Mexico, and I don't mind a leetle game, ef ther boys will j'ine us."

The Mexican took a seat at the table opposite to the miner, and as two others joined them, a game was soon made up.

There was one miner who asserted that the Man from Mexico had a revolver in the hand that held his sombrero, and that Dick Deadly Hand saw it, or suspected as much, and knowing he was not to catch him off his guard, had answered as he did, when otherwise he would have acted differently.

His wounded ear was concealed under a lock of hair, and the Mexican did not even see this much.

"What shall the amount be, senior?" asked the Mexican, pleasantly.

"You name her, Dick," said one.

"Yes, for I are not particular," another remarked.

"Well, call it fer fifty a game, ef thet suits you, Mex?"

"Oh, yes, I am content," was the reply, and the game was begun, while all looked on with interest, wondering how it would end.

The Mexican was almost invariably the winner, and after several hours of playing, pleaded fatigue, and arose with a thousand dollars winnings.

"Gentlemen, I desire to say as publicly to-night as I did last night, that these cards are marked, but I do not believe Mr. Desmond can be aware of the fact; but I warn you all against playing with them, for one's opponents are not always honest. See here!" and the Mexican showed the ingenious line-puzzle on the backs of the cards, which revealed just what each one was.

While the crowd were examining them, the Man from Mexico turned to Landlord Sampson, who said that he had bought them from a man who had visited Last Chance, and had a quantity to sell at a small price.

"He was a pard of yours, you remember, Dick," added the landlord.

"I hope you doesn't mean I know'd his leetle game, landlord?"

"My dear sir, we are not responsible for the sins of our friends; but come, gentlemen, join me in a drink," said the Mexican, and the subject was changed, but it left an impression in the minds of many that Dick Deadly Hand did know that the cards were marked, and that the Man from Mexico also so believed, and meant to watch the desperado.

CHAPTER XII.

DOOMED MAN'S DEN.

HAVING made his purchase of a house, the Mexican strolled up to the ridge to see it, going alone, although the landlord had offered to accompany him.

He found it a well-built cabin with two rooms of good size, each containing a door and window, and with a spacious fire-place in one.

There was considerable furniture of a rude kind in the cabin, for each occupant had fallen heir to the belongings therein of the one who had dwelt there before him, and the Mexican saw that he could make himself really very comfortable there.

He meant to use it only as a dwelling-place, taking his meals at the Hash House, and he sought men to make certain repairs and put up a cabin for his horses.

The place stood on a spur of the mountain range, and was approached by a path from the valley, and no one could come along the trail by day who was not seen a long way off by the occupant, should he be on the watch for him.

There was a ledge leading along up to the mountain range, but a dangerous path to travel to one who had not an iron nerve, as there were precipices around the edge of which it would that would make one dizzy to gaze over unless he had a cool head.

In front of the cabin, under a tree, were five graves of more or less recent date, and at the head of each was a board containing the border

name by which the man had been known, and the date and reason for his sudden taking off.

These "inscriptions" were both unique and forcible, and at a pinch might stand also for an obituary of the deceased.

A shed in front of the cabin was termed by courtesy a "piazza," and under this shelter was a rustic seat on which the Mexican seated himself and gazed upon the five graves not ten feet away, and which seemed to stand forth in bold relief as a warning to the latest inhabitant of the Doomed Man's Den.

The view from the spur was particularly fine, for far up and down the valley the eye could roam, and beyond to the mountain range miles away.

The river and camps were in plain view, with the Hash House rising portentously below, and the neat home of Landlord Sampson and his daughter near by.

Half a mile away, on a ridge was Hallelujah Roost, and the number of white headboards dotting the burying-ground showed that Last Chance had been visited with an epidemic of bullet fever which had been fatal in most cases.

A few weeks after his coming to Last Chance the Man from Mexico had become thoroughly at home.

He had moved into his home on the mountain spur, and had made himself comfortable there.

He passed his time to suit himself, riding about the country by day, gambling by night, and almost invariably mining.

He was generous, always treated the crowd, and never cared to play with a man of limited means.

Whenever Dick Deadly Hand played with him, he named high stakes and others drew out, and left the two to gamble together, and the Mexican seldom lost, though strange to say when the miner was in a game with others he was invariably the winner.

The Mexican always dressed with the greatest neatness and elegance, seeming to be as particular in having his picturesque costume look as well in every-day life in a mining-camp, as though he were in his refined society in Mexico.

He was courteous to all, yet reserved, and sought no friendships, and, to the delight of Dick Deadly Hand, did not seem to seek the society of Stella Sampson, or to curry favor with her father, as he did.

Since her forcing him to obey her the night of the arrival of the Man from Mexico in Last Chance, the miner had been more than ever devoted to the maiden, and she had, on the contrary, been more reserved toward him.

Still the desperado did not look upon the Mexican, after the first few days of his stay in the camps, as a rival to be feared, until the afternoon he came suddenly upon the two riding together along a mountain trail.

Dick Deadly Hand did not know that the meeting had been accidental, and he scowled at the Mexican as they passed, but received a polite bow in response.

The Man from Mexico had met Stella but a few moments before, for he had seen her horse dashing along riderless and had skillfully caught him with his lariat, which he always had at his saddle-horn.

He dreaded evil to the beautiful girl, but she had called out to him a moment after, and he saw her standing over a deer which she had shot.

"Red-skin played me a shabby trick in running off, Senor Merl, and I thank you for catching him."

"You throw a lasso like a Mexican," she said, as he rode up with her runaway horse, for she had seen him catch the animal.

"And am I not a Mexican, Senorita Sampson?" he asked, quickly.

She did not answer the question, but said:

"Please help me with my game."

He raised the deer in his strong arms, and threw it across the back of his horse, behind his saddle, and made it fast.

Then he aided her to mount, and the three rode together toward Last Chance, to come suddenly upon Dick Deadly Hand, who was also hunting among the hills, but on foot.

"You did not answer my question awhile since, senorita?" asked the Mexican, after they had passed the miner.

"Did you notice Desmond's scowl as we passed?"

"Yes."

"That man means mischief, for he has been too pleasant since the night of his affair with you!"

"And with you, permit me to add, for I owe you my life."

"I am not so sure of that, from what I saw you do, for after all you might have killed him, as you were watching him like a hawk, and looking for a chance to draw your weapon."

"You saw that, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"I wished to catch him off his guard for a second."

"And had you done so, he would have not now been alive."

"Perhaps."

"I am sure of it, for your aim is quick, and as sure as death, Senor Merl."

"You have searching eyes, senorita, and took in the situation at a glance."

"Oh, I knew Desmond, and was sure he meant to kill you, and he is a dead shot, and a plucky fellow too."

"He showed nerve that night, certainly; but my idea is had you not been present he would not have faced death as he did."

"Well, I am convinced that he means harm to you, so I advise you to watch him as though he were your deadliest foe."

"I am always on my guard, Senorita Stella; but I thank you, and would again ask why you did not answer my question awhile ago?"

"And what was that?"

"You said I threw a lasso like a Mexican."

"Yes, and you do."

"And I asked you if I was not a Mexican?"

She looked him squarely in the face, and said firmly:

"No, for we have met before, Senor Merl!"

CHAPTER XIII.

STELLA'S DREAM.

At the words of Stella, spoken with a significance which could not be misunderstood, the Mexican glanced quickly toward her, and she thought that she detected his face change color.

"You say that we have met before, senorita?" he asked, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes."

"Never before I came to Last Chance."

"Yes."

"It is remiss in me not to recall you, senorita."

"When were you in Mexico?"

"I never was in Mexico in my life, senor."

"Ah! I have been for awhile in Texas and New Mexico—perhaps it was in Santa Fe I met you, though I see not how I could forget you, once meeting you."

She flushed at his words and replied:

"No, Senor Merle; it was not in Texas nor in New Mexico that I met you."

"Then you are mistaken, senorita—it is a resemblance."

"Senor Merl, I do not wonder at your not recalling me, for I only remembered last night that we had met before, and I'll tell you how it was, and if it is not as I say, tell me."

"Certainly, senorita."

"When I first saw you, your face came to me as one I had seen before."

"It appeared to me like the face of one I had once known well, and yet I could not recall when and where we had met."

"I then decided that you reminded me of some one I had known, and yet who that some one was I could not even remember."

"So your face puzzled me, until last night the mystery was solved."

"Ah! and you recall the one I resemble now?"

"I recall you, senor."

The Man from Mexico smiled incredulously, and Stella went on in her low, earnest way:

"Let me tell you something of myself, will you?"

"It would give me more than pleasure to listen."

"Once, when I was a wee girl, my father was a rich man, and we had a lovely home upon the Long Island Sound."

"I remember it so well, for it was such a dear spot to me, and I never tired of looking out upon the blue waters, in calm or storm, and watching the ships sail by."

"My mother was a Spanish lady, and I was born in Spain, for my father was a great traveler as a young man."

"I remember my mother as a young dark-faced, beautiful woman."

"One day my mother and I were seated in a rustic arbor upon the shores of the Sound, when a boat landed and a man came toward us."

"He handed to my mother a letter, and at once went away."

"I saw my mother's face when she read it, and I recall her look of anguish even now."

"I asked her what was it that burthened her so, and she said simply:

"Come, my child, let us take a row upon the waters."

"It was blowing fresh, and I wondered that she wished to go, but I of course went with her, and our little boat danced about on the waves until I was greatly alarmed."

"At last my mother ceased rowing, and began to weep bitterly."

"I tried to comfort her, but her grief was terrible, and after awhile she suddenly seized me in her arms and sprang into the sea."

"We sunk from sight, and in some way I was loosened from my mother's hold upon me, and when I rose to the surface I saw a beautiful schooner yacht very near."

"I had noticed it before, but my mother's grief prevented me observing it after a glance at it."

"I was sinking from sight again when a man leaped from the yacht's deck and grasped me in his arms."

"The vessel swept on, and it was some time before it picked us up; but my rescuer was a splendid swimmer and upheld me easily."

"I was taken into the cabin, and every effort was made to find my poor mother, but in vain."

"My preserver ordered the yacht then run in to an anchorage near our home, and my father being away, the servants were told of what had occurred."

"Then my rescuer departed, and in vain was it that my father tried to find him, for he never could even learn what yacht it was."

"The body of my mother was found days after and buried, and it was said that she had become insane and taken her life, trying to take mine at the same time."

"To my father only did I tell of that man bearing a letter to her, but he could not understand it, and the note was not found with her."

"Do you recall the scene I have drawn, Senor Merl?"

"Why should I, senorita?" was the quiet response of the Mexican, who had listened with deep attention to every word uttered by the young girl.

"I'll tell you why."

"Last night I had a dream, Senor Merl, and I lived over vividly the scene of my mother's death."

"I was young then, very young, but it made an impression upon me which I can never efface from my memory."

"In my dream last night I lived over, as I said, that fatal scene."

"When in the water, dashed about by the waves, I had such perfect confidence in the brave man who had come to my aid, that I seemed to feel no fear."

"I gazed up into his face, and every feature became stamped upon my memory."

"He said but little then, only to cheer me, and to tell me he thought my mother would be saved also."

"Last night in my dream I heard his voice again—Senor Merl, it was your face, your voice I saw and heard."

"How strange."

"Oh, no, it was not strange, for you are the one who saved me from death that fearful day."

"But how can it be, senorita, when—"

"Senor, it is useless for you to attempt to deceive me."

"You are my rescuer, and I saw your face last night in my dream, as I had seen it then, and I heard your voice."

"Then there was the same accent in your voice as now; it had the very same tone, and when I awoke I knew when and where we had met before."

"Do you still deny it, senor?"

"Senorita Stella, strange things are dreams, and yours has impressed you with the belief that I was your rescuer."

"I am a Mexican, senorita, and your friend was doubtless an American."

Stella shook her head and replied:

"Senor Merl, I seek not for your confidence, nor to pry into your life."

"I know only what you tell me now about yourself, but I am firmly convinced that you are my brave rescuer."

"Some indistinct memory comes to me that the man who brought that note to my mother I afterward saw on the yacht as a seaman, and I know he put right off into the Sound, so must have been picked up by your vessel."

"My vessel?"

"Yes, for I must cling to my belief, senor, and I cannot but feel that perhaps that note to my mother you knew something of."

"I know not what has made the change in your life from then to now, for, by your own confession, you are a gambler now, a roamer at will; but you are the man that saved my life, and again we meet, and I owe you another debt of gratitude, as do all the dwellers in Last Chance."

"But I see that you are determined to deny that you were my preserver in the long ago, so let us say no more upon the subject, please, and yet remember that I am thoroughly convinced, for my dream betrayed you to me."

The Man from Mexico smiled, and said, lightly:

"You remember the lines, senorita:

"A woman convinced against her will
Is of the same opinion still?"

"But, may I ask if your father knows of your dream?"

"No, for I have told no one."

"Then, pray do not do so, for it will only bring up painful memories to him; but, shall we ride on more rapidly, for the sun is setting?"

Stella's answer was to urge her horse on, and soon after they rode into Last Chance together.

That night Stella sunk to sleep, more than ever convinced that her dream had truthfully betrayed to her that her rescuer of the long ago was none other than the Man from Mexico.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ALARM.

THE more the miners of Last Chance saw of the Man from Mexico, the more they were impressed with him.

He held an influence that the oldest miners in the camp had not gained, and more, there was that about him that commanded respect and admiration from all.

There was no poor man in the camps that he

did not aid, in an unostentatious way, and, as has been said, he never won the money of one who was known to be in want.

Men whose claims were panning out well, and who were reckless in their playing, he was ever ready to meet in a game.

There was something in his dark, sad eyes, something behind his handsome face, as impenetrable as a mask, that made all feel that he was a man with a history.

What that history was no one could know.

Of his antecedents no one knew anything more than he chose to tell.

What he did tell of himself was that he was from Mexico, a gambler, and enjoyed a roving life.

It was his pleasure to play cards and wander about.

He sought trouble with no one, and yet never shrunk from danger, and never allowed an unfortunate and weak man to imposed upon in his presence.

Landlord Sampson did not understand him.

He was lavish with his money, even courteous toward him, and yet Gold Grip Sampson seemed to feel that the gambler avoided him for some reason.

He had noted, too, that the Man from Mexico had not sought Stella, as he had feared he would, for though he liked the man, he saw that he was one to dread where a woman was concerned, and he did not wish to have to warn his daughter against him.

As for Dick Deadly Hand and the others, Landlord Sampson had never taken them into consideration as worthy of thought where Stella was the object of their attention.

The Mexican he could not but admit possessed a very remarkable face, and one full of fascination.

His form was perfection itself, and he knew what his nerve and pluck were.

He looked to be of thirty-four, but perhaps was older, and he was in the full vigor of manhood.

Somehow, in spite of his being a professional gambler, Landlord Sampson feared his influence upon Stella, and the evening he had met her in the streets and returned home with her, he took occasion to speak to his daughter regarding him.

It was the custom of Landlord Sampson to go to his home each evening after supper, and spend an hour or so with Stella, who read to him as they chatted together.

The little cabin was charmingly fitted up, for there was a carpet on the floor and curtains at the windows, while the furniture, though rustic, was most serviceable.

There were pen and ink and pencil sketches upon the walls, some oil paintings of scenery and portraits, all Stella's work, a guitar, many fancy little articles of her handiwork, with bear, wild-cat, panther and other skins, trophies of the hunt.

After an hour or two passed pleasantly with Stella, Mr. Sampson would bid her good-night, and go over and fix up his hotel books for the day, after which he would adjourn to the Live and Let Live and count up his earnings, remaining up until late.

On the evening in question, he found Stella running her fingers idly over the strings of her guitar, and seemingly lost in reverie.

Now and then she would sing in a rich, sweet voice a verse of some ballad, but then relapse into her idle drumming of the guitar strings once more.

"Well, Stella, what do you think of that strange Man from Mexico, for you met him this afternoon, you told me?" said the landlord, by way of breaking the ice.

"Yes, father, I shot a deer that crossed my trail, and dismounted to see how I could get him upon my horse, and away went the scamp, leaving me alone."

"Senor Merl was coming along the trail, and I was about to hail him, when I saw him seize his lariat, throw it, and in an instant my runaway was caught."

"And fortunate it was, for you would have been alone in the mountains, miles from home, and on foot."

"You are too daring, my child."

"It was the fault of my horse, father," and Stella smiled.

"Well, to answer my question?"

"What was it, sir?" and Stella knew perfectly well what it was her father had asked.

"About Merl?"

"What about him, father?" was the innocent query.

"What is your opinion of him?"

"I hardly know."

"He is a man of education."

"Yes, he possesses a superior education, sir."

"And is as courtly as a cavalier of old."

"His manners are perfect, father."

"A handsome fellow, too."

"Strikingly so."

"And yet a gambler-gentleman."

"So he admits, sir, I believe, for he says he is a gambler."

"Oh, yes, and a bold one, too, and has skill and luck that are phenomenal."

"I wish I knew more of him."

"There are few here, sir, that we know ought of."

"True; but he is an exception."

"Did you ever see him before he came here, father?"

"No; and yet it strikes me that I have; but I never visited Mexico in my travels, and it is a fancied resemblance to some one I have known that he possesses."

Stella made no reply, for in her question to her father she had wished to discover if he had met the man, or could recall him, whom she believed had known her mother, and from whom she almost began to believe the note had come that had caused such sorrow, which had ended in suicide.

It did not seem to her that the Mexican could be a wicked man at heart, and if he had been the writer of the letter to her mother, certainly he had risked his life to save them, and her he had saved.

There was a mystery in it all that Stella was anxious to see through, and she was not at a loss to know why her father had begun to discuss the Man from Mexico with her.

"Does he know more of this man than he will admit to me?"

"Does he fear I may fall in love with him?" were questions she asked herself.

After a silence of some minutes, in which both father and daughter were busy with their own thoughts, Mr. Sampson at last said:

"Well, my child, the Mexican came here under circumstances that placed us all under a debt of gratitude to him, and he has had a wholesome effect upon that reckless fellow Desmond, and I observe upon others of his stripe."

"He has done more for charity toward good deserving fellows than even I have, and against all warnings, he has bought and dwells in the Doomed Man's Den, so he seems not to know what fear is."

"Just why he has come I do not know; but I sincerely hope he may not prove a villain as some hint that he may."

"If he does, father, he will belie his face."

"True; but he is a man with a history, and I only wish I knew just what it was."

"And so do I," was Stella's mental rejoinder, for she cared not to utter the words aloud.

Ross Sampson was just rising to go over to the hotel, when the Chinese servant at the landlord's household dashed into the room with the cry:

"Muechee shootee at Livee and Lettee Livee pretty quick."

As he uttered the words several quick, sharp reports rung out in the direction of the saloon and the landlord darted from the room.

A moment after Stella followed her father.

CHAPTER XV.

STRANGERS IN LAST CHANCE.

THE "Live and Let Live" as the miners generally called Landlord Sampson's gambling and liquor saloon, was in full blast, and a dozen games were in progress at the various tables, and nearly a hundred men were gathered in the place to spend the greater part of the night.

There were a few who never gambled, and they were playing checkers, backgammon or chess with boards that were made in the camps.

Here and there a man was seen conversing with another apart, and in other places men were seated at tables with glasses of liquor before them and over them discussing the news of the day in general.

But the greatest interest was around the tables where the men were engaged at play, and here gathered lookers-on who were more or less interested, according to the sums at stake.

The Man from Mexico did not put in an appearance.

He generally came late, played a few games for large stakes and then left, after treating all present, as was his usual custom.

There were men in the mines of a better stripe than were the masses, men such as was Ross Sampson, and between these and the Man from Mexico there had sprung up something very like a feeling of friendship.

The Man of Mexico though ever courteous, was reserved, and seemed like one who was content with his own society, and yet this very manner made men respect him more.

So it was that on the night when Sling Slang, the Chinese servant of Landlord Sampson, dashed into his house and told him to come quick to the Live and Let Live Saloon, he dreaded that trouble had come between Dick Deadly Hand and the Man from Mexico, and this was Stella's fear also.

Since the arrival of the Mexican, from some reason, matters had not been going with quite so reckless a hand as before, and at the saloon aforesaid, of which Landlord Sampson was proprietor, not a single death had occurred.

There had been shooting affairs and cutting scrapes in other saloons, and in the mines, but they were of little interest to the frequenters of the Hash House and its surroundings.

Some half-hour previous to the appearance of Sling Slang at the cabin of the Sampsons, three men had entered the Live and Let Live.

They were seen at a glance to be strangers in town.

One was a tall man in what might be an officer's fatigue uniform, though there were no shoulder-straps denoting rank.

His pants were stuck in high-top cavalry boots, and he wore a very handsome pair of what appeared to be gold spurs, the rowel clasped in the beak of an eagle, and the wings going back on either side of the heel.

His close-fitting pants and fatigue coat showed his splendid form to perfection, and about his waist was a military belt, with sword-straps, but no blade, though a pair of handsome revolvers were in holsters, one on either hip.

His hair was dark-brown, curling and fell upon his shoulders, while he wore a mustache and imperial.

His face was bronzed as though from constant exposure, and it was a face to see and remember.

He wore a black slouch hat with a broad brim, and on one side was a pair of small crossed sabers.

His companions were also in blue fatigue suits, but without swords, and appeared to be private soldiers of a cavalry regiment.

Their faces were heavily bearded, and they wore no crossed sabers upon their hats.

They walked to a table that was occupied by two miners and sat down, for there were three vacant seats there.

The two miners were playing checkers, and one of them glanced up, and observing the strangers, touched his companion under the table.

The other looked up, and gave a slight start.

The stranger who looked like an officer called for drinks, and leaving his two companions, after dashing off his glass of liquor, walked over toward a table where a game of cards was being played for large stakes.

One of the players was Deadly Hand Dick, and he was playing with a miner who never indulged in a game where the amount gambled for was less than a hundred dollars.

He was known as Poker Pete, and had a mine that panned out well, while he was also most lucky at cards.

He had been a strong rival of Dick Deadly Hand in cards, but the latter had generally been the winner in a game with him, when Poker Pete had as often won from every one else he had played with.

He had expressed often a desire to play with the Man from Mexico, but it had so happened that he had never gotten the opportunity.

Now he was ahead of the game with Dick Deadly Hand, and winning steadily, the amount played for being two hundred dollars.

Poker Pete was a man to be feared, and few cared to have trouble with him.

Even Dick Deadly Hand had never sought trouble with him, and those who had done so were up in Hallelujah Roost.

As the stranger walked up to the table, Poker Pete glanced up, started, and played the game out rapidly and nervously.

He seemed not to have his mind longer on what he was doing, and Dick Deadly Hand won, and with cards that would never have done so, had not Poker Pete seemed suddenly to lose his nerve.

"I plays no more, pard, for I has other biz on hand jist now," he said, and he rose quickly from the table.

"Permit me, sir, to join you, if you are still in the humor of playing," and the stranger addressed Dick Deadly Hand, while Poker Pete without any excuse for his sudden ending of the game walked quickly away.

"Yas, I are a man as plays ter win, and don't squeal ef I loses, so jist camp out in Poker Pete's cheer and name ther sum yer plays fer, pard," said Dick Deadly Hand, who was rather glad to get rid of the man who had been so steadily winning his money up to the last game.

The fact was Deadly Hand had not played with his usual luck, since the coming into Last Chance of the Man from Mexico, and some of those with whom he was not very popular had hinted that it was a proof that he had used marked cards.

Certain it was that Landlord Sampson had gotten a new supply, as those he had had on hand the Mexican had shown him were all most skillfully "doctored."

The stranger bowed, took Poker Pete's vacated chair, and said:

"Will a hundred be too high, sir?"

"Not for me, ef you kin stand it, Stranger Pard."

The answer of the stranger was to put down a hundred dollars on the table and the game was begun.

The miner won, and with a pleasant smile the stranger said:

"You play well, sir, and as we are in the same game let me introduce myself."

"I belong to the army and my name is Reckless."

"You has a handle to ther name, I guesses?"

"If you mean a title, yes. I am a captain."

"Wall, Cap'n Reckless, I are glad ter know yer, and I interdooces myself by the name I am know'd by out here, and it goes."

"I are called Dick Deadly Hand by boys, ther seein' as how I shoots quick and ter dead center, but I were christened Richard Desmond."

"What are yer regemint?"

"The Twelfth Dragoons."

"I doesn't know 'em; but I guesses yer is lookin' fer ther trail o' them Gold Ghoul's o' ther trail as we calls 'em and as they calls themselves the Devil's Dozen?"

"I am on a Secret Service trail, sir; but suppose we double the stakes in this game?" said the officer pleasantly.

"I are yer man," replied Dick Deadly Hand, and the game was begun just as Poker Pete entered the saloon again and with two companions.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ACCUSATION.

WHEN Poker Pete returned into the saloon, he was no longer nervous. He had become perfectly cool, and there was a strange expression upon his face.

Pete was no saint, and was not known as such in Last Chance. He was not known to be a cheat at cards, but then he was a wild one; people had no confidence in him and wholesome dread of him.

He was noted for his enormous strength, for he could even handle Dick Deadly Hand, if it came to a test of muscular power between them.

No man cared to test his grip, and he had been known to handle a large and strong antagonist as though he was a child.

He was a man of good stature, stout and powerful of build and stood squarely on his feet, while his movements were quick and springy.

He came into the saloon accompanied by two friends, both of whom were known to be his "right bowlers."

They worked in his claim, and were always with him, and they were supposed to be bad men, but nothing more than "quick drawing" and "shooting to kill" could be proven on them.

It was evident to those who had seen Pete's glance at the stranger, and the nervousness that followed, with his hasty disposition, that he was up to some mischief when he returned to the saloon with Digger Dave and Eucher Charlie, as his two comrades were called.

As for the stranger he seemed not to have observed Pete; or if so, he had taken no marked notice of him.

The second game had progressed between Captain Reckless and Dick Deadly Hand to the end, when Poker Pete and his pards entered the saloon and came up to the table.

This game Dick Deadly Hand had also won, and he was in good humor, for he was regaining what he had lost to Pete.

"Let us make the stake three hundred this time, Mister Deadly Hand," said the stranger, as he took from his pocket a very well filled wallet and placed the amount he had named down upon the table.

"I are ther man ter call yer when yer plays high, Pard Cap'n, so three hundred goes," was Dick's response.

"Hold, pards! I calls ther turn now, and arrests that man as ther *Chief o' ther Devil's Dozen!*"

"Hands up, pard, for my finger is on ther trigger!"

The words caused an instant of commotion, then a dead silence in the saloon, and they were uttered by Poker Pete.

The latter had taken a position to one side of the strange officer, while just in front of him, across the table, were Eucher Charlie and Digger Dave, and they had their revolvers in their hands.

The revolver of Poker Pete was leveled at the stranger, and the muzzle was not three feet from his head.

The sudden commotion had been from the men who were in range, suddenly springing to one side, and at this work the denizens of Last Chance were all adepts.

Then, too, all had ceased playing and chatting at the bold command of Poker Pete, to see what would follow.

The stranger had glanced up quickly, his face had changed color, as with surprise or anger, but he did not spring to his feet or show excitement.

He simply glanced at Poker Pete and asked:

"Am I to understand that your words are addressed to me, sir?"

"Don't you see my revolver a-coverin yer?"

"I do."

"Didn't you hear what I jist shouted?"

"I did."

"Then up with them hands, or you goes ter glory through Hallelujah Roost."

"You mean for me to raise my hands above my head at your demand?"

"I does."

"Why?"

The coolness of the stranger somewhat disconcerted Poker Pete, but he responded:

"Cause I holds yer as my game, for I knows yer."

"And who am I?"

"Ther Cap'n o' ther Devil's Dozen, I told yer, and I gits ther price on yer head."

The stranger smiled and replied:

"I am an officer of the Twelfth Dragoons, and you must be careful not to make a mistake, or it will be the worst for you, my fine fellow."

"I says yer is ther Chief o' ther Devil's Dozen, and ef yer don't surrender, then I kills yer."

With a slight movement of his lips the stranger gave a shrill whistle, and his two men stepped forward.

"Ask my soldiers, then, who I am, sir?"

"Keep him covered, Dave and Charlie, while I gives a look at these soldiers," cried Poker Pete, and he turned to the two men who had approached their captain.

One glance Poker Pete took, and it was a quick, searching one, and then he called out, addressing all present:

"Pards, these hain't no soldiers, 'cause I knows 'em, too."

"They is all of 'em members o' ther Dozen Gang, ther robbers o' the gold trains."

"I says they is, and I is shoutin'."

"Hands up, all three o' yer, or my revolver talks, and what it says goes."

Still the stranger did not obey, nor did his two comrades.

The latter kept their eyes upon their chief, as though waiting a command from him, or a sign.

He still remained perfectly cool, and turning to Dick Deadly Hand, who all saw was ready to chip in on one side or to the other, said:

"This gentleman has interrupted our game, sir; but let us continue please."

The miners became more interested in the man.

He seemed to utterly ignore Poker Pete.

And all crowded nearer, for they were sure something was going to be done that would end in a tragedy.

Many feared that Poker Pete was wrong, and knew that if he was he made a great mistake to attempt to arrest an army officer as an outlaw chief.

If he was right, then certainly there was no escape for the lawless leader and his two men from that saloon, with a hundred miners to aid in his capture.

If he was wrong, then the miners would be better pleased not to interfere.

So there was nothing to do but to stand off and await developments.

Addressed as he was by the officer, Dick Deadly Hand replied:

"I are willin' ter play, pard, but Poker Pete makes a bold charge ag'in' yer, and maybe yer had better show yer papers."

"I have a special order in my pocket, sir, as I said, sending me on Secret Service duty, and I am willing to show the address and signature, to convince you, but the contents of course I will not, for that is a Government secret."

"That is squar'."

"Yes, give him a chance."

"Maybe yer is wrong, Poker Pete."

"Let him show his papers."

"Don't make no mistake, Poker Pete."

"Yes, go slow, or it may go hard with Last Chance ter make a mistake."

Such were the remarks of the crowd, and which showed the tenor of their thoughts.

As for Dick Deadly Hand, as the stranger had addressed his words to him particularly, he felt called on for a reply, so rejoined:

"Pard, ef yer papers is O. K., Poker Pete hain't ther man ter press yer."

The stranger at once thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his fatigue jacket and drew out an official-looking envelope.

It had the Government imprint upon it, and was addressed to:

"CAPTAIN ROYAL RECKLESS,

"Twelfth Dragoons,

"Fort ———,

"Colorado Ter'y."

Taking from the envelope a paper, the Government stamp was revealed, and it was dated at Fort McPherson, Nebraska, more than ten days before, and there was a page of closely-written matter addressed to Captain Reckless.

"Here, gentlemen, you see is my name, here the order addressed to me, and you will notice that the name of Colonel Carr commanding at Fort McPherson is here signed to the document."

"If this is not satisfactory then I shall not allow myself to be arrested by any fool that considers he has found in me the famous outlaw chief whose red deeds have won for him the name of Captain Cruel."

The stranger had risen to his feet, after having shown his papers, and his words and manners convinced the miners, almost to a man, that Poker Pete was wrong, and they meant to side with the officer.

As for Deadly Hand he was convinced that Poker Pete was in the wrong and so he said:

"Pard Pete, yer has struck a wrong trail this time, so leave it."

"Never! That man is Captain Cruel. I stake my life on it!" cried Pete in a ringing voice, and he again leveled his revolver at the strange officer.

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE PROOF NEEDED.

THE bold words of Poker Pete, and his manner seemed to indicate that he was pretty sure of being right, or he wanted to have trouble.

Where others had been convinced by the officer's words and orders, he had remained firm in his first charge.

There were men there who now recalled Poker Pete's manner when he saw the stranger, and how quickly he had quit playing and left the saloon, to return with his two allies.

One of these now spoke up and said:

"Gents, it are Captain Cruel, for I knows him too."

It was Eucher Charlie, and Digger Dave quickly put in another word in favor of his friends, for he said:

"Poker Pete are right, for Charlie and me knows them fellers, too, and they is from ther Devil's Dozen and no mistake."

These three recognitions of the officer and his men carried conviction to the minds of many that Poker Pete was right.

Others however thought that Poker Pete meant to have out his words, and had gotten his comrades to back him up.

That Poker Pete and the stranger had met before there seemed no doubt, or the miner was very much mistaken, and was deceived by a resemblance of the officer to Captain Cruel.

All, or many present knew that Poker Pete had met Captain Cruel, and had named some day to be avenged upon him.

Now all eyes were turning from the stranger's to Poker Pete, and a score of hands were resting upon revolver butts.

Dick Deadly Hand still kept his seat.

He was deeply interested in every word and look, but seemed to have made up his mind not to take sides with either party just then.

The strange officer was still cool, but he looked angry and annoyed, and his men were silent, but some thought a trifle nervous.

"It is your put to prove yer words, Pard Pete," said Dick Deadly Hand after a short and painful pause.

"Pards, I'll do it, for I hain't one to be fooled easy."

"Yer all knows thet I digged a fortune onst out o' a mine to ther north o' here, and were going home with ther dust?"

Many nodded assent.

"Waal, I hed a cool twelve thousand in dust on the coach with me, and whar I never 'spected ter see road-agints they jumped us."

"Ther driver were shooted on ther box by my side, thet bein' Cap'n Cruel's way o' haltin' a hearse, and I seized ther reins and thought ter go through on ther run."

"But them agints was trained same as soldiers."

"They calls 'em ther Devil's Dragoons," said a miner.

"So they does, and they hain't far wrong, nuther."

"Waal, ther leaders hed a man a-holdin' o' 'em in a second, and two more agints seized ther wheelers by ther bits, and we was brought to a halt."

"I shot one man, but that were no use, for thar was plenty more."

"I hears they is called ther Devil's Dozen, pards, for they allus goes as twelve, but no matter if yer knocks over one, two or five o' 'em, thar is allus more ter fill up and keep ther dozen complete," said a miner, and his words were listened to with interest, while another confirmed what he had said with the remark:

"I knows that ter be so, gents."

"Waal, pards, it wasn't no use, and so I jist hands up mighty quick."

"But it did no good for they shot me while I were askin' for marcy, and I were left fer dead."

"But I wasn't so dead as I looked, and I seen 'em got hrough the old hearse and rob every one o' ther pilgrims, and they got every dollar o' my gold dust too."

"Then they lighted out, but not until I hed seen ther face o' ther leader so I'd know him next time I come upon him."

"They was all masked, but ther cap'n, thinkin' I were dead, tarded his face toward me and tuck off his mask to wipe ther sweat off, for it were a hot day and no mistake, and then it were I seen him so well, for he did it several times."

"Waal, one o' ther pilgrims druv the old hearse off, as ther driver were dead, and I were left thar, and I tell yer I hed a day and night o' sufferin' I kin never forgit, afore another coach come along and picked me up, and I has charged it all ter ther Devil's Dozen, and thet man standin' thar are Cap'n Cruel, and don't you forgit it."

"But can't you be mistaken, Poker Pete?" asked a miner, who with the others had listened to the man's story of his loss and sufferings.

"No, I can't, for it wasn't ther only time I seen him, as he came to ther station while I were thar wounded, and I seen him good."

"He were a-travelin' then, but I dasn't say nothin' until arter he were gone, and then I set ther boys on him and they went arter him."

"They was three, and he one, but one come back in a hurry and said as how thar had been two suddint deaths back up ther trail, and he hed lit out fer a doctor, and more, he told how

ther gent had said he were Cap'n Cruel and invited 'em all three to take him, and git ther reward fer his head.

"And, pards, them two gents thar, were along with thet gent, when he robbed ther coach, fer I seen thar faces too fer a glance, so I was able to identify ther outfit afore yer as Cap'n Cruel and two o' his gang, and they hev come inter Last Chance ter play it on us heur fer no good."

The words of Poker Pete created an impression.

There was something in his manner that showed he firmly believed what he said in regard to the three men.

The miner who had before asked him if he might not be mistaken, glanced at the accused man.

He was pale, but as cool as ever, and his eyes flashed with anger.

He had a confident smile upon his lips, that looked as though it was in his power to show that the miner was all wrong regarding him.

His two men had turned very pale, and were standing close together, and it was very evident that they did not like the situation in which they found themselves, even if innocent.

At last the miner spoke, and he was a man of influence in the community.

He was well off, and kept the store at Last Chance.

"Pard Pete," he said, "it is a serious thing to make a mistake, where an army officer is the victim, so I hope you will go slow in this matter."

"This gentleman has told us he is a captain of cavalry in the Twelfth Dragoons, and is on special service, and he has shown us papers to prove his words."

"He has two men with him, and they say he is what he says he is."

"Now, the officer may greatly resemble Captain Cruel, the Chief of the Devil's Dozen, and no one would wish to catch that outlaw more than I would; but he would hardly venture here, and I must say I believe you have made a mistake."

"Say, Pard Carter, don't Eucher Charlie and Digger Dave agree with me, and they was once in a coach in New Mexico as was robbed by Cap'n Cruel, and a woman in ther hearse snatched off his mask, and they seen his face plain."

"And is this the man who robbed your coach, pards?" asked Mr. Carter, turning to Poker Pete's two companions.

"Fer a Gospil fact he are," replied Eucher Charlie.

"And you, Dave, what do you say?"

"I'll swar he are ther man that robbed our coach, and ther woman unmasked, and we were told it were Cap'n Cruel and his gang who did ther work," was the rejoinder of Digger Dave.

Then Carter turned to the officer and said:

"You have heard, sir, and if you are what you say you are, certainly you can give us some further proof, for otherwise Poker Pete will hold you a prisoner."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PROOF.

At the words of Carter the storekeeper, all eyes turned upon the officer and his two men.

The better class of men, those disposed to have peace, were glad to see Miner Carter, as he was often called, for he had several claims in the valley, take a hand in, for they knew his good sense and discretion would bring matters around without trouble if it could be done.

When he had told the officer that Poker Pete would arrest him unless he gave more proof of his being who he said he was, all glanced at the accused.

His face suddenly changed from its smile, and he said sternly:

"This is an outrage which will cause you men so suffer who accuse me, so I warn you not to interfere with an army officer in the discharge of his military duties."

"But, sir, will the delay of a couple of days, until a man can be sent to the nearest military post to bring proof of what you say, incommode you much?" asked Carter.

"It will greatly, sir, for my orders are imperative, and I only halted here for a few hours to rest."

"Where are you stopping, sir?"

"I had not put up anywhere, yet."

"And you came mounted?"

"Yes, my horses are near."

This looked strange, and a hum ran through the crowd, when the accused man said:

"I will frankly admit now, as my situation is becoming not only annoying and unpleasant, but serious, that I have been before taken for this outlaw chief, and have been joked on my resemblance to him by my brother officers."

This seemed to be in favor of the accused, but Poker Pete again held the trump card by the remark:

"How did they know you resembled Cap'n Cruel, for he allus goes masked, and if not it are when he are playin' gent, or some game same as you is springin' on us now or tryin' to?"

"I tells yer, pard, I only seen thet cap'n's face

by accidint, and when he were at ther stage station, and I can't be mistaken in recognizin' them two fellers also."

The accused bit his lip as though in anger, and then said:

"Well, what is your intention regarding me?"

"My intention are ter jist make yer hands up and tie yer, and then git proof thet you is Cap'n Cruel, when I'll be at yer hangin', and then rope in ther five thousand offered fer yer head, and two thousand on them men o' yourn, fer thar heads are wuth in ther market one thousand apiece."

"So don't make me miss ther hangin', by killin' yer, so up with them hands o' yourn, or I pulls trigger."

"Never will I submit to such an indignity."

"Stand out of my way, all, for I pass here!"

The words rung out like high notes, and the speaker suddenly leveled a revolver.

Then some one fired, and yet who, no one knew, and one of the soldiers fell dead.

Quickly several others shots followed, two from the revolver of the accused, and Digger Dave fell dead, while Eucher Charlie was wounded.

But in spite of his temporary success the bold man found himself suddenly surrounded by a wall of humanity, and Poker Pete, with a score of others, had him covered with revolvers.

Another step and he would have been riddled with bullets.

"Hold! what means this trouble?"

The words came sharp and distinct, and sweeping a pathway through the crowd, suddenly the Man from Mexico confronted the accused officer at bay.

A dead silence followed, and all eyes were upon the Man from Mexico.

The stranger, at sight of him, started, and then said, quickly:

"Ah! Senor Merl! I am glad you are here, for these men say I am not Captain Reckless of the army, and are going to hang me as Captain Cruel, of the Devil's Dozen."

All saw the start the Man of Mexico gave as his eyes fell upon the stranger.

The words of the latter had been heard by all, and they implied that he was all that he represented himself as being.

Then the Man from Mexico spoke, and it seemed to those who heard him that he replied reluctantly:

"Gentlemen, this officer must go free."

"Man o' Mexico, that hain't no officer, but Cap'n Cruel, o' ther Devil's Dozen gang," cried Poker Pete, now stepping forward so as to confront the Mexican.

"I said that this gentleman must go free, and I recognize him."

"I don't kere a durn what you says, Mexican, for I says thet are a outlaw, and I knows him."

"He hev kilt one o' my pards, poor Digger Dave thar, and wounded Eucher Charlie."

"I was fired upon, Senor Merl, and my two men lie dead there, so I but protected myself," the officer said.

"Waal, yer don't go out o' this saloon alive, onless yer goes ter hang, and I says it, fer yer is worth five thousand dollars ter me, and I know yer is Cap'n Cruel."

All saw now that there would be trouble, for Poker Pete meant to press matters, and Dick Deadly Hand was seen to speak to him in a whisper, but no one caught his words.

"And I say this officer shall not be disturbed, so be warned," the Mexican returned, quickly.

"He are right, if he knows him, Pard Pete."

"Yas, Mexico has recognized him."

"Don't crowd it on, Poker Pete."

Other remarks were made, and it was supposed that Poker Pete would yield to the general pressure.

But instead, he said, emphatically:

"Pards, hear me!"

"I says thet man thar be Captain Cruel, and I stakes ag'in' my words, ter back 'em up, every dollar I owns in Last Chance, and I'll give ther papers to thet effect."

"He are ther Chief o' the Devil's Dozen, and ef he hain't proved so, then I loses all I has got."

"Ef he are proved so, then I hangs him and get ther price on his head, and I collects for them two men o' his, too, for I dropped 'em, so you has heard me."

"But, Poker Pete, the Senor Merl has recognized the gentleman as an army officer, I am told," said Landlord Sampson, coming forward just then, and having learned from one of his bartenders just what was going on.

"See here, Pard Sampson, I don't hev ter be told what I knows, and I says ef thet Mexican stranger says thet man are not Cap'n Cruel, then he are one of ther gang himself, and I believe he—"

The words suddenly ceased, for Poker Pete, giant that he was, suddenly found himself in the grasp of a man who seemed fairly to play with him.

With a power that raised a yell of amazement and admiration, the Man from Mexico seized Poker Pete in his powerful arms, swung him over his head and dashed him with terrific force into the corner of the saloon.

Then, quick as a flash, he had his revolvers

drawn and stood at bay while he spoke in a voice that rung with deadly earnestness:

"Is there any one else here who dares to make the charge against me that man did?" asked the Man from Mexico.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SPY ON THE TRAIL.

THERE was not a man in that large saloon who dared, even if he cared to do so, make the charge against Senor Merl which Poker Pete had done.

Poker Pete had not been present when Dick Deadly Hand had tried to bully the Man from Mexico, so all he knew of the affair was from hearsay.

He had been reckless in his assertion that Senor Merl was an ally of Captain Cruel, as he had vowed the stranger to be, and this accusation which he had clung to against all seeming facts to the contrary, had cost the life of Digger Dave, the wounding of Eucher Charlie and the killing of the two men who he said were not soldiers but outlaws.

Poker Pete saw in the capture of these men, the chief and two outlaws, should they be proven to be such, seven thousand dollars for him, not to speak of revenge for what money he had been robbed of, and his having been wounded by the Devil's Dozen.

So with all this he was desperate, and determined to beard the Mexican.

He realized his mistake in this the moment he felt the iron grip of the Man from Mexico upon him.

He had trusted in his own giant strength and quick aim even against a man who was becoming an idol in Last Chance without having played the desperado to become a hero.

He had never met his match where a test of strength was concerned, and he had not expected to find him in the slender-formed Mexican.

He was prepared to draw when he uttered his words, and yet the Man from Mexico was too quick for him.

He had also expected Dick Deadly Hand to back him up; but that worthy had not done so, even if he had intended, and his face showed how thoroughly he was amazed at the strength of the Mexican.

In the previous trials he had had with Poker Pete, Dick Deadly Hand was able to fully appreciate his great muscular power and activity, and yet the Man from Mexico had handled the miner without resisting effort.

So Dick Deadly Hand had quickly gotten from under the eye of the Mexican.

As for Poker Pete, he had fallen with such force that the breath had been knocked out of his body, but otherwise than a good shaking up and bruises he was not harmed.

He rode slowly, and in a dazed sort of way, and looked about him.

"When did I light, pard, fer it do seem ter me as though I had been flyin'," he said, in his quaint way, addressing a miner who was aiding him.

"Yer did take a leetle fly, Poker Pete, and yer lit hard."

"Thet man are a terror."

"How many o' 'em flung me over heur, or did somebody back a mule up ag'in' me?"

"No, thet gent from Mexico shot yer over heur, and he hev iron arms, or I sweetly lies to yer."

"I didn't think it c'u'd be did with me; but let me draw on him," and Poker Pete reached for his revolver.

"Hands up there! None of that!"

"Durn him, he kin see through ther back o' his head," and Poker Pete raised his hands as ordered, for the Mexican had seen his act.

"My man, I don't wish trouble with you; but you insulted me and I punished you for it, so if you do not consider that we are quits say so."

"I calls ther game off, pard; but what is yer ter do with thet outlaw?"

In an instant the weapon of the stranger was leveled, and the finger on the trigger.

But quicker than was his movement, the Mexican knocked up the revolver, and the bullet flew over the head of Poker Pete, who stood with his hands upraised, as the Man from Mexico had ordered.

"How dare you fire on a man, sir, when his hands are up?" he said sternly to the officer, and turning quickly to Poker Pete, he continued:

"I told you that I recognized this officer, and that must settle it, so do not again make the accusation against him that you just did."

"Pard, I must go ag'in' my eyesight not ter do so—yes, and my ears too; but I owes you my life, and I thanks yer and says let up, so I pass."

"Does it go?"

"Yas."

"Thankee, and I won't fight yer; but ef yer does find you is mistaken, and Poker Pete hain't, jist tell me about it."

"Pards, I says evening, for I goes to my lay-out, as I feels as ef I had rhumatiz in every identical jint."

"Man o' Mexico, yer is ther iron-armedest man I ever felt the grip of, and Poker Pete are yours truly."

With this Poker Pete left the saloon, and Dick Deadly Hand followed him.

The stranger, after his sudden shot at Poker Pete and rebuke by the Man from Mexico, seemed a little crestfallen.

He had acted upon impulse, when again called an outlaw by Poker Pete, and seemed sorry of it.

"Now, sir, will you accompany me to my cabin, for Landlord Sampson will see to your men's having decent burial?" and the Man from Mexico turned to the stranger.

"With pleasure, Senor Merl," and he turned to the landlord and said:

"Pray let my men be sent to a room in the hotel where I can examine their wounds, for I must report them sir, in full."

Landlord Sampson gave the order, and the officer followed the bearers of the bodies closely.

"Why not leave them to the landlord to look after?" said the Mexican, impatiently.

"It is necessary for me to do so," was the reply, and the officer paid the bearers of the bodies liberally, and dismissed them and closed the door, leaving himself and Senor Merl alone in the room.

Then he bent over first one body, and then the other, and took therefrom some things from each which the Man from Mexico did not see as he was pacing to and fro.

"I am ready now, senor, if you wish me to accompany you?"

"Yes, but your horses?"

"I will ride my horse and the others will follow, or, if I turn them loose will return to the fort."

"To the fort?"

"Yes."

"I need two good horses, and if you will sell yours I will purchase them from you."

"Pray accept them."

"No, I will only buy."

"Very well, set your price."

"I have not seen the animals so know not their value."

"What are they worth to you?"

"About five hundred for the pair, as they are fine animals."

"I will take them."

"I would rather you would accept them from me?"

"No, I accept no favor, if I can help it, you being the only man to whom I owe a debt."

"Which was more than canceled to-night."

The Mexican bowed and made no reply, but led the way from the room.

"Mr. Sampson, please pay this gentleman five hundred dollars from my money in your hands, and keep the two horses I have bought from him until the morning."

"Certainly, Senor Merl, where are they?"

"I am going now after my horse," said the officer, and a Chinese was sent along to bring back the two animals purchased by the Man from Mexico.

"They are fine beasts, as you said," Senor Merl remarked, as they came into the light from the hotel.

"Oh, yes, I never have my soldiers ride an inferior horse."

"But now, senor, I am at your service, if you wish."

"Yes, come with me."

The Man from Mexico led the way as he spoke, up toward his cabin on the mountain spur, and a miner who was standing in the shadow of the Hash House left his retreat and slowly followed them.

He had gone but a few paces when a tall form stepped out from behind a shanty.

"They have gone on up to Mexico's cabin, Dick."

"Then follow them and don't fail to learn all," and Dick Deadly Hand walked away, while the spy followed on the trail of the Mexican and officer.

CHAPTER XX.

A LOOKER-ON.

HARDLY had Landlord Sampson left his cabin, at the warning of Sling Slang, the Chinese, when Stella followed.

While her father went into the saloon, she cut across the yard and took up a position on a rock which gave her a view into the scene of trouble, and was so near that she could step into the bar if she wished to do so, and had on a former occasion when she had so opportunely gone to the rescue of the Man from Mexico.

From her position Stella could see and hear all that went on in the saloon, and she did so.

She was there before her father had entered, having gone around by the door, and she heard enough to tell her the situation aided by a glance.

The dead soldiers were in plain view, and Eucher Charlie was being carried out by two friends, while Digger Dave lay over near the bar motionless.

The officer was there, with Poker Pete, and the situation was a grave and threatening one, for Dick Deadly Hand appeared to be nagging on the mischief.

Then the Man from Mexico entered and Stella saw all, heard all, and gave a cry of alarm, which ended in one of amazed admiration at his wonderful exhibition of strength, for she well knew what a giant Poker Pete was said to be.

She glanced a second time to see if it really could be Poker Pete, and then she saw Dick Deadly Hand and noticed that he had the appearance of a man who meant mischief.

She saw that the officer was a striking looking man, scarcely thirty years of age and possessing a fine form.

In spite of his coolness she thought that she detected a certain nervousness about him when he met the Man from Mexico.

"They have met before, they know each other, and yet neither seems to be glad of the meeting," she muttered to herself, for her woman's eye read more than what others saw.

Then she saw Poker Pete raised up and heard what followed, and when he left the saloon she glided away.

Her intention was to go in to the officer, and as she was about to enter by a narrow hallway leading from the yard, she heard a voice from the outside in the street call out:

"Ho, Poker Pete, come heur pard!"

"Are that you, Dick Deadly?"

"Yas."

A moment stood Stella undecided, and then she glided to the end of the hall, where there was a window looking out into what was known as Valley street.

The hall ran across the house, with one door leading into the office, and the one opposite led into the dining-room, then dark and deserted.

One end of the hall opened into the yard which Stella crossed to and from her own quarters, and the other end looked out into the street.

To this window went Stella, and as the light came dimly into the hall from the office she was not visible from without, and she could see and not be seen.

Then, within six feet of her, stood Dick Deadly Hand, and Poker Pete came toward him, walking as though he was suffering and sore.

"You didn't help me out, Pard Dick, arter argin' me ter crowd ther Mexican, though I tells yer that hain't no officer, but Cap'n Cruel, sure as my name are Poker Pete."

"Which it hain't, for not many owns up heur ter baptized names; but ther Mexican are lightnin' and ef yeou didn't hev no time ter shoot, fer yer weepson were already drawed, how did yer expect me ter do it?"

"Lightnin'? Waal I sh'u'd say he were greased lightnin'."

"Why didn't yer grasp him and let him know what yer c'u'd do?"

"Dick Deadly Hand?"

"Yas."

"Doesn't yer admit I kin handle you?"

"I has ter, but yer is ther only man who kin."

"Thar yer sweetly lies, pard, fer ther Mexican man kin jist play with yer, as I never knew a man c'u'd hev sich a grip."

"Handle him? Why I were a child when he got his iron fingers onter me."

"Waal, what are yer goin' ter do about it, Pete?"

"What kin I do?"

"Yer is sart'in ther officer hain't what he says?"

"I knows it."

"Yer really thinks ther Mexican knows ther stranger?"

"That are sart'in."

"Waal, ef ther stranger are Cap'n Cruel, and the Man from Mexico knows him, why then they is pards."

"It do look thet way, Dick."

"And we is entertainin' a wolf in lambs' wool in Last Chance."

"Maybe so."

"Waal, let's find out, Pete."

"How?"

"I kin put Bunco Bill upon his path, for when they come out they'll go to ther cabin of ther Mexican, or to a room in the hotel, and tha'r talk tergether will tell it all."

"Yer is wise, Dick, fer it will."

"Maybe yer hed better go yerself."

"Me, Dick?"

"Yas."

"Don't yer see I are a candidate fer a hospital?"

"Waal, say Bunco Bill."

"Why don't yer go yerself, Dick, fer then you and me only knows it?"

"No, I prefer to send Bunco."

"Yes, it's safer."

"Yer don't think I is afeerd of ther Mexican, does yer?"

"No, only a leetle skittish, as I are, and durned me ef I blames yer; but I'd hate to see him hurted by findin' out he were a pard o' Cap'n Cruel, fer he saved my life."

"Bah! he didn't do it frum no love o' you, Poker Pete."

"Maybe he didn't, but he did it all ther same, and a life's a life, Dick Deadly Hand."

"He nearly killed you before, though."

"Yes, he sent me flyin', but for all that I

doesn't wish ter see him strung up, for ther boys will do it, ef they finds out he an' Cap'n Cruel is pards."

"Well, he must take his chances, for I puts Bunco Bill on ther trail of 'em."

"Waal, you knows best, but will Bill do it?"

"Yas, he owes me money, and knows I is onter his racket o' cheatin' old Sampson."

"Ther landlord seems ter like him, Dick."

"He do, and yet he don't know thet Bunco has been robbin' him, and borrowin' money from me ter keep ther books and cash straight; but if I refused to lend him ther dust to squar' his cash up next Sunday, why thar would be trouble fer Bunco, fer Sampson hain't no man ter be robbed, and he is out some hundreds o' dollars."

"Now I'll go and git Bunco Bill and have him ready to watch for ther comin' of Mexico and your man, and if they goez inter ther hotel, why he kin git ther room next door, and if they goes to ther cabin, he kin trail 'em and hear all they says."

"Jist wait until I git Bunco."

"And I'll git some one to watch Bunco Bill, whose life my father saved and gave him a good home and pay to serve him, and who returns his kindness by robbing him."

"I feel mean to be an eavesdropper, but I will thwart those villains, for Senor Merl is certainly not the ally of outlaws," and Stella glided away from her place of concealment and hastened home.

There she called up an Indian woman, one whom Ross Sampson had found several years before sick by the side of the trail, and had carried to camp and cared for until she recovered.

When she did she at once disappeared from the camps, but in two weeks time returned accompanied by an Indian warrior, and the two asked to serve the pale-face who had been so kind to the squaw.

The idea occurred to the landlord to teach them how to work, and when Stella arrived at Last Chance, she found Zuma a most useful attendant, while Gowango her husband was an able assistant of her father.

They were Utes, and from what they told of themselves, which was precious little, Stella gleaned that from some reason they had fled from among their people, and liked their new home among the whites.

"Zuma, tell Gowango to come here," said Stella as Zuma came at her call, for their tepee was back of the landlord's cabin.

Five minutes after the Indian warrior was on the trail of Bunco Bill.

CHAPTER XXI.

BUNCO BILL.

BUNCO BILL was what the miners called the "right bower" of Sampson's Hash House.

That is he was a clerk.

He wrote a good hand, had, evidently received a good education, but had as surely left his old home, wherever that might have been, for scenes where he hoped not to be bothered by meeting old acquaintances.

He had frankly confessed that he had been a bunco-steerer in Chicago, for a while, and so had been called Bunco Bill by the miners, as his name, so he said, was Bill Chambers.

Ross Sampson could not get "characters" when he hired help, and he had found Bunco Bill an apt, quick and through man.

He had worked hard for the interests of his employer, and was supposed to be strictly honest.

A man of fine presence, he yet had a face that was to be feared.

Still Sampson was an easy-going fellow, and he did not care to dive too deep into the life of any man, so long as he served him well.

Bunco Bill seldom played cards, or, that is, openly, and he always had a limit to his game, and that limit, so Ross Sampson had observed, was always within the amount he received as salary from him.

Then he invested a few dollars now and then with miners in a claim, and said that he was prospering.

From the coming of Stella, Bunco Bill had been a different man.

His manners had lost the roughness of the border, and he seldom went into the saloon except on business.

He worked hard and late, and won the confidence of his employer still more.

He owed his life to Ross Sampson, who had saved him from sudden death on one occasion, and so had seemed to be thoroughly devoted to his interests.

Stella did not dislike the man, for he was ever so anxious to please her in all things.

If there was a delicacy to be had, Bunco Bill secured it for her, and he was so respectful at all times to her, she could not dislike him, though she had mentally decided if he did not wear two faces, he belied the one he always had on when in her company.

Stella was a good reader of human nature, too, and a keen observer, and she had observed when the stage arrived, that Bunco Bill was apt to stand where, unseen himself, he could view the passengers as they got out.

When all had alighted, she had noticed his face change from a look of anxiety to one of satisfaction, and he would step forward and welcome them in his pleasantest manner.

This she had observed many times, and had spoken to her father about it, and his explanation had been seemingly satisfactory, for he had said:

"I don't doubt, my child, but that Bunco Bill has been in some scrape, and may dread arrest."

"But he is honest toward me, and faithfully discharges all his duties, so I have nothing to do with his past."

This convinced Stella that the clerk of the Hash House was in dread of the arrival of some one by the stage whose coming might affect his future life.

Upon the evening of the scene in the saloon, when the army officer was suspected of being an outlaw chief, Captain Reckless of the outlaw band of gold-hunters, known as the Devil's Dozen, Mr. William Chambers, alias Bunco Bill, sat in his room making up the accounts of the hotel, for the last of the month was at hand when the miners were to be presented with the landlord's "call on yer fer feed," as they expressed it on receiving their bill for board.

Suddenly the door opened and a visitor entered the by no means unpleasant quarters of the clerk.

In his way Bunco Bill was a genius, and he had fitted up his room with a bath and almost every luxury.

He looked up as the visitor entered, and the position of his desk was such that he could get the drop on a man very quickly, and on a shelf on either side, but concealed from other eyes than his own, were a couple of revolvers ready for instant use, even to being cocked.

Bunco Bill was ready to welcome an enemy in a very sudden and deadly manner, and the touch of a hand on the latch without would give a click to put the occupant of the room on his guard.

Bunco Bill was not to be caught napping, that was certain.

"Ah, Dick, it is you, is it?"

"Come in."

So greeted Bunco Bill his visitor, but though the man spoke as though Dick Deadly Hand was welcome, he yet did not look pleased.

"Yes, it are me—busy is yer?"

"Quite."

"Makin' out calls for feed, I guesses, as it is night pay time?"

"Yes."

"Waal, yer writes a hand like a parson, and spells accordin', I guesses, for I can't read yer lingo, but they says it is because I doesn't spell accordin' ter Daniel Webster."

"Did you want to see me particularly, Dick?"

"Waal, yas."

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"How stands our leetle account, Bunco?"

"Great heavens! you don't intend to demand money of me?" and the clerk looked really alarmed.

"I asked yer only how ther account stands, Bunco?"

"Well, I owe you two hundred and fifty dollars, and was going to ask you for as much more by Sunday."

"Been playin' ag'in?"

"Yes."

"And lost?"

"Yes, but—"

"Waal, yer will go and play them fellers down in ther camps who skins yer, inste'd o' playin' in ther Live and Let Live where Sampson won't have no cheatin', ef he knows it."

"I dare not play here; but can you let me have the money for Sunday, Dick?"

"Yer owes ther bank five hundred, then?"

"I will be short in my cash that amount on Sunday."

"And you want me ter trust yer fer more when yer is behind to me now?"

"Yes, Dick Deadly, for I don't wish to have to jump the town, and I'll pay you back, you know."

"Waal, I won't pay now, ter-night, and ef yer does as I tells yer, I'll call ther back account squar', and I'll lend yer ther money fer Sunday."

"Done! it's a bargain."

"Who am I to kill?"

"Yer is durned anxious ter kill some one, now hain't yer; but it are eavesdroppin' work I wants did. That is easy work."

"Waal, it may be, and maybe not."

"Yer knows ther Man o' Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Waal, ther' come inter ther saloon ter-night a man whom Poker Pete jumped as Cap'n Reckless o' ther Devil's Dozen."

"Now he were in half-uniform and hed two soldiers with him, but Poker Pete said that he were ther chief o' ther Dozen, and Eucher Charlie and Digger Dave backed him up in it, and though ther stranger showed up papers and all that he'd 'a' been strung up ef it hadn't 'a' been for Mexico who comed in an' recognized him."

"Mexico says he are who he says he are, and in ther difference o' opinion ther two soldiers

was kilt; Eucher Charlie got hurt and Digger Dave called in his chips.

"Now ther stranger will either come to ther hotel here with Mexico, or he'll go up to ther cabing with him, and you is ter trail 'em at once and know jist what he are, for when they talks ther will tell, and you'll find out if ther Man from Mexico are ther secret pard o' ther stranger, who are ther outlaw cap'n."

"I'll go and gladly, for I have—yes, yes, I'll go, and at once, Dick," and the clerk seemed most eager to begin his work, and a few minutes after was lying in wait for the coming of the two men whom he was to watch.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAN OF MEXICO GIVES A WARNING.

THE two men, Senor Merl and the one whom he had surprised, left the saloon of the Live and Let Live together.

"Come with me to my cabin, and then, if you remain to-night in Last Chance, you can return to the hotel," said the Man from Mexico, and there was a certain coldness in his manner of speaking that was marked.

"Thank you, but I shall not remain in Last Chance to-night, but will go with you to your cabin, if you wish," said the stranger, in the same strained manner as the other had assumed.

Then the two walked on in silence, turned into the path leading up to the cabin on the ridge, and arriving there, the Man from Mexico threw open the door, lighted a lamp, and said:

"Sit down, please."

"You are comfortably situated here, senor," said the stranger, glancing around him.

"Yes, very, for the border," and the Man from Mexico took a seat on the opposite side of the table from his guest.

"Mining out here, I suppose?"

"No; gambling."

"Ahl a good business, I suppose?"

"Yes, to a bold and skillful player; but I did not expect to see you here."

"Nor did I look for you in these parts, for, though I had heard of a person known here as the Man from Mexico, I little dreamed it was you."

"May I ask why you are here now?"

"Well, I came on business of a personal nature."

"Which I can guess, I suppose?"

"Knowing me as you do, perhaps you can; but I concluded to run into Last Chance, play a few games to win, and then look about me to see what was going on."

"I understand, and it is best that we at once understand each other."

"I think we do."

"No, I fear you do not understand me, and I am anxious to have no mistake."

"Some years ago we were friends, and you knew something of my life."

"Something, I know not, care not what, drove you to seek safety in flight, to live upon the border, and about a year and a half ago we met again, and you saved me from a fearful death."

"I was thankful, so very thankful to you, and yet I was deeply pained to find that you, my former friend, you, the one who had saved me from a death most appalling, had become what I then found you to be."

"We parted, and I went on my way, and you find me here now as a gambler in Last Chance."

"I met you to-night in this camp and for no good."

"Knowing you as I do, I can well understand why you came here, and yet when I recognized you to-night, I could not but befriend you."

"Had I not done so you would have been hanged, and you know that the proofs seemed strong against you."

"I saved you, and thereby I have canceled the debt of my life, saved by you."

"Now it is my wish that you go at once away from Last Chance."

"Do not await the coming of day, but go to-night, and do not again show yourself in Last Chance, or I may be unable, yes and unwilling to protect you."

"You ask this, or demand it of me, Senor Merl?"

"I ask it, first."

"If I refuse?"

"I demand it."

"If I still refuse?"

"Then I will not raise hand to save you."

"You think they will hang me?"

"I know it, for Poker Pete has surely recognized you as one who has wronged him."

"But my papers?"

"They will hang you first and investigate afterward."

"You deem it best that I should go?"

"At once."

"And your motive for wishing to get rid of me?"

"To save you from death in return for the past, and the debt of life I owe to you."

"No other?"

"To protect those among whom I have made my home."

"You don't mean that I shall not carry out the plans I have in view."

"I mean, sir, that it must be hands off as far as the miners and dwellers in Last Chance are concerned."

"Why, the place is a gold-mine."

"So be it, get your gold elsewhere."

"I learn that old Sampson is a very rich man."

"So it is said."

"And has a beautiful daughter."

"What is that to you?"

"Much."

"Well, I have warned you, and I warn you now to take heed."

"You ask too much of me."

"Oh, no, I ask simply justice, for this is my home now, these people are my friends, and I intend to protect them all in my power."

"Which is saying a great deal, for I know of what you are capable."

"Then take my warning for all it is worth."

"Well, I'll go away from Last Chance, and to-night."

"You are sure?"

"This is the only promise I will make, and you had better, for your own sake, let me be considered what I am supposed to be by many."

"There are some who will believe Poker Pete against all else."

"Well, they cannot prove it, and you recognized me as an army officer."

"And you do not pledge yourself to keep your hands off of Last Chance?"

"I do not."

"It will make me your enemy if you do not."

"I am sorry, but you owe me your life, and would hardly wish that I should do more for you."

"I owe you my life, yes, and to-night cancel the debt by giving you yours."

"How so?"

"If I had not said that I knew you last night you would have been hanged."

"Perhaps."

"And were I to say now I was mistaken, that you are not the man I believed you to be, the miners would surely hang you."

"Well, that does about even matters, and so, as I said before, I am under no bond to make pledges."

"I will leave the camps to-night, but will go unbound by pledges as to what I will and will not do."

"As you please, sir."

"May I ask about Sampson's daughter?"

"What would you know of her?"

"Is she engaged to any miner in camp?"

"Miss Sampson's affairs I am not acquainted with," was the frigid reply.

"I learned that she saved your life?"

"Ahl then you knew I was here?"

"Only as the Man from Mexico."

"I did not expect to find you in that personage."

"Yes, Miss Sampson came to my rescue at a very critical moment."

"So I heard."

"You seem to be well posted in happenings in Last Chance."

"Yes, I must keep well informed."

"Perhaps through spies here?"

"I cannot tell you; but I must be off now, for I do not think it would be just safe to be found here in the morning."

"Hardly; and permit me to remind you that it would not be just safe for you to return here."

"I can well believe that."

"Or to interfere with the dwellers in Last Chance."

"I shall consider your warning, and then decide what is best."

"I can tell you now which is best, and that is to take my advice."

"Well, Senor Merl, we will not quarrel, and I will say good-by."

"We may meet again, but under any circumstances I am your friend, remember."

"My debt to you is canceled, I am to understand?"

"Well, yes, call it quits between us, if so you desire."

"I thank you for your aid to-night," and the stranger offered his hand.

Senor Merl grasped it and opened the door for his guest to pass out.

This the stranger did, and moved away in the darkness.

Ten minutes after the Man from Mexico left the cabin to go to the hotel.

He seemed in doubt of the man he had just parted with.

As he walked away from the cabin he stumbled over something in his path, and stooping he found it to be a human form.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STELLA'S ADVENTURE.

GOWANGO the Ute warrior was a fine specimen of the red-skin.

He was a young brave, scarcely over twenty-four, and had simply left his people with the Indian maiden whom he loved.

His father was the great chief of the tribe, and he had determined to marry Zuma himself. But Zuma loved Gowango as dearly as he loved her, and together they had fled from their tribe, and found a home together in the mountains.

They had been captives of the whites, years before, when the warrior was but a youth and Zuma a mere child, and they had both learned to speak English and something of the ways of the pale-faces.

But they had been recaptured by a raid of their braves on the war-path, and had returned to their village.

Zuma was the dusky belle of the Ute tribe, and many warriors had sought to win her love as she grew to maidenhood; but from childhood, when she and Gowango had been captives together of the pale-faces, she had loved the handsome young brave.

When at last they had fled together, Gowango having his own father as a rival, they had passed through many hardships, and Zuma had broken down with sickness and had thus been found by Mr. Sampson and cared for.

Gowango, who was away on a hunt, had believed her taken by her people and had returned secretly to the neighborhood of his people's village; but discovering that she was not there, had gone back to their little retreat in the mountains.

There he arrived the very day of her return from Last Chance, and telling her story of the friendship of the pale-faces, Zuma had persuaded Gowango to go to the home of Mr. Sampson with her.

Thus it was that the two became domesticated at the home of Ross Sampson.

The warrior was a fine hunter, and supplied the table of the Hash House with game and fish, and Zuma learned how to make herself useful in many ways.

When Stella arrived she quite won the hearts of the two red-skins, and under her teaching Zuma became a most able assistant.

It was this Ute, Gowango, which Stella had sent on the trail of Bunco Bill, who was himself following the steps of the Man from Mexico and the stranger.

Stella had told the red-skin to follow Bunco Bill, who she feared intended harm to the Man from Mexico.

She had feared he would be too late, so had hurried him off with few instructions, but had said:

"Do not kill him, Gowango, but go after him."

"If before him, tell the Senor Merl to be on his guard against eavesdroppers."

"If too late to give the warning, follow Bunco Bill, and do not let him listen at the cabin of the Man from Mexico."

"Gowango was pleased to serve Stella, and started upon his errand."

He reached the hotel just as he saw Bunco Bill start off, and he saw by his actions that he was dogging the steps of some one.

So he knew he was too late to give warning to Senor Merl, so followed the clerk of the Hash House.

He saw the light flash out from the cabin of the Mexican, and the door close.

Then he saw Bunco Bill stoop down, and stealthily approach the cabin.

He could see but one purpose for Bunco Bill's actions, and that was to kill the Man from Mexico, or the one with him.

He must not himself kill Bunco Bill, for this Stella had told him not to do; but he must prevent what the tracker ahead of him meant to do in the way of harm.

So he glided forward as noiselessly as a cat, his moccasined feet unheard as they fell, and his hand grasping a stout stick.

Quick as a flash, when Bunco Bill was yet twenty paces from the cabin, he brought down his stick upon his head.

With a moan the clerk sunk in his tracks, and lay motionless.

Then the red-skin glided away and returned to the cabin.

Ross Sampson was still in his saloon, and so Stella was alone in the cabin, for Zuma had returned to her tepee.

He was in the room before Stella suspected his presence, and she slightly started as he appeared before her.

"Well, Gowango, did you find Bunco Bill?"

"Yes, me find him."

"Where?"

"He leave big tepee and follow trail of Mexico Man and his friend."

"Ah! to the cabin of the Man of Mexico?"

"Yes."

"And what did he do?"

"Creep like wolf to Mexico Man tepee, and me hit him so, 'fraid he going to kill, and he lie still."

"You did not kill him?" cried Stella in alarm.

"No, only hit so with stick, and make him like dead."

"You stunned him?"

"Guess so, he no move."

"I fear you hurt him, and perhaps killed him."

"No, he all right some time quick."

"I hope so sincerely, for I meant him no harm."

"Him have pappoose gun in hand, and maybe kill Mexico Man if Gowango not hit him."

"Ah! he had a revolver in his hand?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps Dick Deadly Hand paid him to kill the Senor Merl, or Poker Pete urged him to shoot the stranger," and this Stella said to herself.

But to the red-skin she said:

"Very well, Gowango, you can go to your tepee now."

"Good-night," and with this, Gowango departed for his own quarters and was soon asleep, for he felt no concern at his act.

But not so with Stella.

She feared the Indian might have really harmed Bunco Bill, and this she would not have had happen under any circumstances.

So she threw on a wrap and left the cabin.

She made her way up the ridge trail, and slowly and cautiously approached the cabin of the Man from Mexico.

Her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and she saw in the trail a dark object, and not fifty feet from the cabin.

With something of awe, and a dread that it was the dead form of Bunco Bill, she drew near and bent over.

"Mr. Chambers?" she called softly.

There was no reply and no movement of what she now saw was a human form.

She laid her hand softly upon him, just over the heart, and said quickly:

"He is not dead, thank Heaven!"

Then she placed her hand upon his head, and started as she felt that it was wet and her finger touched a wound.

The Indian had hit a hard blow that had cut through the scalp to the bone, and the man was stunned and still unconscious.

"He may be seriously hurt, and I must return and get Gowango and do something to aid him."

As she spoke the door of the cabin opened and she saw two persons in the glare.

One she recognized as the stranger whom she had seen in the saloon and the other was the Man from Mexico.

Instantly she sprung back into the thicket and remained quiet.

She heard the stranger say good-night and saw him walk away.

Then the door closed and a moment after he stumbled over the form of Bunco Bill.

"Hal! there has been red work here, for this fellow seems dead."

"No, he lives, for his pulse beats."

"But it is nothing to me living or dead, so I will go on," and he rose from his bending posture and took a step forward.

Then he halted and muttered in a tone which Stella heard:

"What if he should have heard what passed in the cabin?"

"But if so who wounded him?"

"Well, he might have heard and it would be safer to silence him."

So saying he turned toward the prostrate form once more, while his words implied a threat and Stella saw his right hand drop upon his knife-hilt.

Instantly she spoke:

"Hold!"

At the word the stranger bounded away and fled down the ridge trail like a deer.

"That man is guilty of crime or he would never have fled as he did."

"It was not fear, unless that he was wounded, or ambushed, and he knew that his capture meant death."

"Now I will return for help," and so saying Stella left her place of concealment just as the cabin door opened once more and she saw the Man from Mexico step out and come down the trail.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SECRET BETWEEN THEM.

THE Man from Mexico walked swiftly down the trail until he came upon the prostrate form in the path.

"Hal! can he have been assassinated already?" he said, as he bent over the form.

"No, it is not he, but Bunco Bill, as near as I can discover in the darkness."

"Yes, and he has been dealt a blow on the back of the head."

"I will take him to my cabin, and see what I can do for him."

He raised the form in his arms, and bore it back to the cabin.

As he closed the door behind him, and laid Bunco Bill upon the floor, there came a tap at his door.

He started, dropped his hand upon his revolver and called out:

"Come in!"

The door opened and Stella Sampson entered. His face flushed, and he said with surprise:

"The Angel of Last Chance here?"

"Yes, Senor Merl, and I will tell you why," was the quick reply, and closing the door Stella stepped toward him, and continued rapidly:

"I wish to tell you that I saw what happened

in the saloon to-night, and afterward overheard a conversation between Poker Pete and Dick Deadly Hand, they standing just out of the hall window of the hotel.

"I saw you come to the rescue of the stranger, the officer, and knew that Deadly Dick, who had kept quiet, intended mischief, and accident caused me to get at his secret."

"He and Poker Pete seemed to feel that you were the ally of the stranger, and that he was really the one he was accused of being, and Dick Deadly Hand undertook to find out."

"To do this, he used Bunco Bill, who owes him money, and sent him to dog you and the stranger to your cabin near, and learn what passed between you."

"To thwart him, I sent Gowango, the Indian, to follow Bunco Bill, and the red-skin dealt the clerk a blow that stunned him, and I hope is no worse, and finding on his return to me what he had done, I came to see what harm was done, and to place you upon your guard—but see, Chambers is recovering consciousness, so I will depart," and without giving Senor Merl a chance to speak she fled from the cabin.

For a moment the Man from Mexico seemed about to go after her, but he changed his mind and turned to the prostrate form upon the floor.

Bending over, he laid his hand upon the pulse of Bunco Bill, and then stepping to a cupboard took from it a bottle, and with a teaspoon forced some of the liquid it contained into the man's lips.

Then he got a basin and water and bathed the wound, after examining it, and drew the cut together with plaster.

The eyes of Bunco Bill opened and rested upon him, and Senor Merl noted the start that he gave.

"Well, Chambers, you have had a close call," said the Mexican, quietly.

"Did you strike me?"

"If why should I do so, for what reason had you given me?"

"Besides, I never strike a man from behind, like an assassin."

"I beg pardon, Senor Merl; but I was coming up here to speak to you, and felt a blow, and nothing more."

"Why were you coming to seek me?"

"I wanted to befriend you."

"You had your revolver in your hand when I found you in the trail ten minutes ago."

The clerk winced at this and said evasively:

"I thought I heard some one near, so drew my revolver."

"Perhaps it was the man who struck me."

"Perhaps."

"But was not some one here a few minutes ago, for it seemed that I heard voices?"

"Yes, Captain Reckless was here."

"Ah! that is the man I was going to tell you to send away, as I overheard men talking and feared there would be trouble for you and him."

"And that is why you were coming here?"

"Yes, senor."

Could Stella have been mistaken?

Was the man really coming to befriend him?

So thought the Man from Mexico, but instantly there came to him the belief, as he gazed upon Bunco Bill, that he was guilty.

"I thought it was a feminine voice I heard?" and Bunco Bill glanced about the cabin.

"I know of but three females in the camps, Bunco Bill, and what should have brought any one of them here?"

"I was mistaken, for my head still rings from the blow."

"You found me in the trail, then?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Where you had fallen, some sixty feet from this cabin."

"And brought me here and helped me?"

"I did what little I could for you."

"Why?"

"For humanity's sake alone, Chambers, for I have well known that you did not like me."

Bunco Bill's face flushed and he replied:

"I have nothing against you, Senor Merl, and really now feel that I owe you my life, for I would have died if left there."

"You are very kind to me; but am I able to go?"

"Stand up and see, and I will accompany you to the hotel; but my advice to you is to say nothing of this affair to any one."

"I will not speak of it, sir, if you will be good enough to look after my wound."

"I will do all I can for you—yes, you are better, and the walk will do you good."

"Let me aid you."

Supporting the form of the clerk with his strong arm, the Man from Mexico left the cabin and went down the trail slowly.

"Here is where I found you."

"Yes, here is where I fell," said Bunco Bill, and the two passed on to the hotel, and thence to the clerk's room.

Then Senor Merl dressed the wound of the man carefully and with skill, and seeing him into bed left him.

After a look into the saloons and a walk about the camps he returned to his cabin, convinced that Captain Reckless had left Last Chance, and

then he set off on his return to his own quarters.

As he went up the hill a man came out of the thicket and walked rapidly down toward the hotel.

It was Dick Deadly Hand, and entering the hotel he soon stood at Bunco Bill's door.

A knock brought a faint call to come in, and entering and locking the door behind him Dick Deadly Hand advanced toward the bed.

"Well, gone to bed and business to be did?" he said, with a sneer.

"I did all I could, and some one gave me this blow on the back of the head."

"Who?"

"I do not know, for I was on my way up to the cabin when I fell, and knew nothing more until I came to in the Mexican's cabin."

"He dressed my wound and came here with me."

"And ther outlaw?"

"I did not see him."

"Waal, he are gone, and yer heerd nothin'."

"I did the best I could; but who do you suppose hit me?"

"The Mexican o' course."

"But he found me."

"Nonsense, he hain't no fool, and so were on ther watch and let yer have it hard."

"Then, arter he had his leetle talk with ther Devil's Dozen man he picked you up and pretended he had found yer there hurted."

"Dick, I half believe you are right," said Bunco Bill, and he seemed to have suddenly been given food for thought.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BUTTERFLY.

WHEN Dick Deadly Hand left the hotel, after his interview with Bunco Bill, he made his way down what was called by courtesy the "Gold Dust Boulevard," and stopped at a saloon second only in importance to the Live and Let Live.

It was a large affair, but very noisy and with a wilder set of frequenters than those who sought the saloon of the Hash House.

There were other resorts of a like character in Last Chance, but a jot below this one, so that there were three stratas of miners' society, so to speak, in the camps.

The saloon into which Dick Deadly Hand turned was known as the "Pack of Cards," and in it were gathered a motley throng.

It adjoined a "hotel" known as "Miners' Kitchen," and both were under the same proprietorship.

The proprietor bore the name of Whitehead, or at least he said such was his name; but as he had fiery red hair, the miners had quickly given him the more appropriate cognomen of Boss Redhead.

He was a burly fellow, a miser and a money-maker, and so long as men let him alone he did not care what went on in his saloon, but he would have order in his hotel, and woe be unto the man who began a difficulty there.

His prices were cheap, in the acceptance of the word in Last Chance, and he gave good fare in the Miners' Kitchen, but made up for it by selling the worst of liquors in his saloon, the Pack of Cards.

When Dick Deadly Hand entered the Pack of Cards he was greeted with a shout.

He was regarded as an "aristocrat," as a frequenter of the high-priced hotel of Ross Sampson, and it was an honor to have him visit Boss Redhead's dive.

He paid no attention to any one more than by a nod, and walked up to where a man sat playing cards.

It was Boss Redhead, and Dick Deadly Hand said bluntly:

"Boss, seen Butterfly ter-night?"

"Yas, Dick, he were here a hour or so ago, but left when he heerd o' ther scrimmage up at Sampson's."

"What's come of it?" was the answer of the saloon-keeper, as he drew toward him a pile of gold-dust he had just won from some of his customers.

"Thar was a man thar as Poker Pete swore were the Chief o' ther Devil's Dozen, though he said he were a army officer, and blood were spilt over it."

"That's all I knows."

"And whar is ther officer?"

"Oh, he were recognized by the Man o' Mexico, and went to his cabin with him."

"And Mexico lit inter Poker Pete, I has heerd."

"Yas."

"Mexico kinder runs ther Sampson lay-out, don't he?"

"Maybe he does, Boss Redhead; but yer don't know whar I kin find ther pet of your lay-out?"

"No; Butterfly lighted out from here, leavin' a stake he had won on ther boards, when he hear o' ther row at that peaceful place o' Sampson's, and I hain't seen him since."

Dick Deadly Hand wheeled suddenly, and left the saloon, declining half a dozen invitations to join in a game.

He walked rapidly up the valley for a quarter of a mile, and crossing a foot-bridge over a stream, turned into a narrow glen or canyon.

Up this he went to the head of it, several hundred yards, and halted at the door of a small cavern built against the base of a rocky cliff, the sides of which were broken by scrub trees growing out of fissures in it.

All was dark at the cabin, and no answer was returned to Dick Deadly Hand's knock.

"I guesses, from what Redhead said, and Butterfly's bein' away, thet Poker Pete are serenely correct about thet gent in uniform," he muttered, and he was starting away from the cabin when he heard a step, and a moment after a form appeared in sight.

"Hands up! who's thar?" called out a voice, and Dick Deadly Hand answered gruffly:

"Nobody's a-robbin' o' yer roost, Butterfly."

"Ah, it's you, is it, Dick?" and the speaker came forward, opened his door, and entering the cabin, soon had a light.

"Yas, it's me, and I hev comed fer a business talk, Butterfly," said Dick Deadly Hand, following him into the cabin.

"I am a business man, Dick, so just ther one you want."

"Sit down, and there's whisky in that bottle, Sampson's best, for I never drink at the Pack of Cards."

"Now, what is it?" and the speaker turned full upon the miner.

He was a slenderly-formed man of medium height, but of quick movements, and had the appearance of being a dangerous customer.

His hair was blonde and worn long, and he wore no beard upon his reckless, rather attractive face.

But his costume was one to attract attention, and had gained for him the name he had borne of Butterfly, and by no other was he known in Last Chance.

His jacket was of blue velvet, trimmed with gold braid, and his pants were tight-fitting, white-dressed buckskin, the outer seams fringed and stuck in boots with red tops.

A yellow silk shirt, black cravat and red sash, with a dove-colored sombrero, encircled by a scarlet cord, completed his costume, while he wore weapons in his belt that were bright and serviceable looking.

His expression was sinister, and his smile, which was constant, was not sincere.

"Was yer up at Sampson's to-night, Butterfly?" begun Dick Deadly Hand.

"No, for I was playing a game at the Pack of Cards."

"Didn't see ther visitors, then?"

"What visitors?"

"The soldiers."

"No; are there any there?"

"There was three, a officer and two men."

"Where are they now?"

"Two of 'em is graveyard fruit, ther men, and ther officer has lit out."

"Why?"

"Waal, Poker Pete said as how he recognized him, as ther Chief o' ther Devil's Dozen, and thar was a row, and Eucher Charlie and Digger Dave backed up Poker Pete, and one of 'em is all ready for Hallelujah Roost, and t'other laid up fer repairs."

"And who did all this?"

"Butterfly, you is a sly one."

"How do you mean?"

"You knows all about ther affair."

"Who says so?"

"I does, for I has been on yer trail."

The young man started visibly, and said, in a threatening tone:

"Dick Deadly Hand, I am not the man to be dogged with impunity."

"Waal, don't play me fer a fool, Butterfly, and pertend ter know nothin' o' ther cirks ter-night, when yer hev jist left thet officer."

"Who says so?"

"I does."

"Did you see me?"

"No."

"Did any one else?"

"No."

"How do you know, then?"

"I guesses it."

"From what reasons?"

"Waal, in our little talk t'other day you said as how yer c'u'd arrange what I wanted yer ter do."

"Yer said as how yer hed a brother who were a road-agent, and yer were friendly with him, though he were a outlaw and yer was leadin' a honest life a gamblin' here in Last Chance."

"Well?"

"So I engages yer ter help me in my leetle work ter git rid o' ther Man from Mexico, and I feels sart'in them soldiers come here ter kidnap him, or pick a row with him and call in his chips fer ther gold I offered you to have it did."

"Now you is ther secret pard o' them road-agents, I'll swar to, and ef yer sarves me right yer is safe as a rat in a church; but I want yer ter do as I says, and I don't say nothin', fer what yer does won't hurt me."

"Now yer ran out o' ther Pack o' Keerds when yer heerd o' ther row up at Sampson's, and yer has jist left thet officer, I bets money on it, so yer see I has yer down fine, so yer might as well pass and come out fa'r an 'squer' with me."

The smile never left the face of Butterfly, as the miner was speaking, but as he finished what he had to say he put forth his hand and said:

"Dick, put it there, for you are my man and I will trust you: but it is sure death to you if you break the compact between us."

"Do you agree?"

"If I says no?"

"Then you are a dead man," and the speaker was not Butterfly, but a man who stood behind Dick Deadly Hand and held a revolver at his head.

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER A MASK.

DICK DEADLY HAND felt that he was fairly caught in a trap.

He certainly had not expected to find any one in the cabin other than Butterfly, and that individual had opened the door with a pass-key and admitted him.

To his knock, before Butterfly came, no response had been given, and certainly no one had entered the door, as his face was toward it.

"Pard, I caves, and I grieves I are gittin' childish, though I hain't seen thirty year yet, for I is outdone by thet Man from Mexico and a gal, and now you have me foul; but I pass."

So said Dick Deadly Hand, and he addressed himself to the man behind him, rather than to Butterfly.

"Come round and sit down, for I am sure we can trust Dick," said Butterfly, and the one who had appeared so unexpectedly upon the scene took a seat at the table.

He was dressed in buckskin, and wore a broad slouch hat, which was pulled down over his eyes.

His leggings were stuck in top-boots, and his hair was golden in hue, long and curling, while a long full beard completely concealed his face; but Dick Deadly Hand, after a piercing glance, came to the conclusion that the beard was false, worn as a mask, and he half-suspected that the yellow hair might be a wig as well.

He was a large man, with athletic physique, and sat down like one who held a certain consciousness of power.

"Do you side with me, Dick, and take oath to be one of us, in consideration for what we do for you?" asked Butterfly, with his smile, which now was in earnest, at the discomfiture of the miner.

"Waal, yes, fer I told yer t'other night I were willin' ter do fer you if yer helped me out; but who in thunder are this gent?"

"My brother."

"Waal he may be; but hain't he no name so as yer kin introduce me?"

"Yes, you might call him captain, for he is the chief of the Devil's Dozen."

"Ther devil!"

"Yes, the devil himself, if so you will, Dick Deadly Hand; but Butterfly told me you wished my aid, so I am here to serve you!" said the stranger.

"It don't seem jist squar' ter git help ter remove one man outer yer way; but yer see ther one I is arter gittin' rid of hain't no ordinary person I kin tell you, and ef I undertook it myself, then I might be ther one as were pulled fer bone-yard fruit, afore I were ripe."

"So I went ter git him outer ther way so I kin hev a fair chance with a leddy I hev sot my eyes on, and who were blinkin' quite outer sweet at me afore this pilgrim come along."

"Now yer understands ther nature o' ther work I wants did, and I hev ther gold-dust ter pay ther bill, so what does yer say, Cap'n o' ther Devils Dozen, or maybe ther old Dev himself?"

The stranger laughed and replied:

"Butterfly promised to help you out?"

"Yas."

"Why did you seek his aid?"

"Waal, Butterfly hev twice saved me from tarnin' up my toes, and were ever so friendly with me; but, I got kinder suspicious thet he hed friends out o' this camp, and so I axes him ter play pards with me in my leetle game."

"Against your rival?"

"Yas."

"And Butterfly agreed?"

"Yas, pard, he did."

"Well, who is this rival?"

"He are known in these parts as ther Man from Mexico."

"Ha! he is your foe then?"

"He are."

"And what is it you wish me to do?" and the stranger spoke in a deep, rich voice, in a matter-of-fact manner, while Butterfly, as though in the presence of a superior remained silent.

"I wants yer ter ambush ther Man from Mexico and jist fill him full o' lead."

"Why can you not do it?"

"I wants ter be round whar folks kin see me when Mexico dies, as I might be suspected, and ther miners in Last Chance act mighty suddent whar they suspicious a man."

"I see; but I must refuse to kill your rival."

"You draws out o' ther game, yer mean?"

"Yas."

"Waal, is you skeer'd o' him?"

"No, but I will do him no harm, though if you have any one else whom you wish to die,

and care to pay for the work, I'll kill him with pleasure."

"It then are as Poker Pete said."

"What is that?"

"You and Mexico is pards?"

"I do not understand what you mean by pards."

"You is in ther same game?"

"No, for he is not one of my band, and in fact has been their foe; but I will do him no harm, I promise you that."

"Thet wins my game from me then?"

"As far as the life of the Mexican is concerned, yes, for I will not harm him, nor allow it to be done if I can help it, while, if he should be foully dealt with I shall hold you responsible, Dick Deadly Hand, so see to it that the Man from Mexico does not die or disappear suddenly; but I can help you all the same."

"As how, pard?" said Dick Deadly Hand considerably moved by the manner and words of the unknown man before him.

"With the lady."

"Miss Stella."

"Who is the lady?"

"Waal, I s'pose I might as well make a clean breast o' it, if yer is ter help me, fer Butterfly knows already."

"It is best, if we expect to do business together, Dick Deadly Hand, to fully understand the situation and each other also."

"I guess you is right, Pard Cap'n."

"I know I am, and if I am to help you I must understand the whole affair."

"I hates this sidin' with ther road-agints ag'in' my people here in Last Chance, but then it hain't ter aid yer in nothin', so here goes:

"Yer see ther leddy I have in mind loves me fer sartin'; but thet stranger come along, and maybe she thinks he has more dust than me and so kinder leans up ter him."

"Sart'in it are I'd hev spotted him with a bullet ther night he come ef thet leetle petticoat hadn't come in through a winder and made me h'ist my hands and thus save him."

"Now I feels a leetle revenge about thet, but I'll fergive her when she are my wife, and she'll fergive me too when she are Mrs. Dick Desmond."

"I see."

"Yer don't see yet, but yer will, fer I wants ter run off with her and marry her."

"Now she wouldn't go if I asked her, but ef she were captured by ther road-agents, you an' yer Devils, pard, and I tarning up and rescuo'd her, then I c'u'd git her ter splice with me over at Red Oak, whar thar are a sky pilot who c'u'd tie ther knot fer us."

"Then I comes back ter Last Chance all serene, and ther Man o' Mexico has got left so far behind ther trail are cold."

"Then why wish to kill him if you marry the girl as you plan?"

"Ye see he are a terror, and fer ther happiness o' ther Dick Desmond outfit it are better he sh'u'd be lyin' up in Hallelujah Roost."

"Where is that?"

"Thet's what we calls our bone-yard upon ther hill."

"Yer see some o' ther boys wanted ter call it ther Golden Stairs, others wanted it Miners' Rest, and one man said Hallelujah Roost were ther correct name fer it, and in ther fight they hed over it he were kilt, so in honor o' his dyin' with his boots on fer thet name he had proposed, we jist set it down unanimous-like as Hallelujah Roost."

"I see; but I will not aid in placing the Man from Mexico in Hallelujah Roost, nor will any of my band, and as you will get the girl, see to it that you do not lend him any aid."

"But when I comes back with my wife he may open on me."

"Then you must take the chances of leaving your bride a widow, that is all."

"But yer'll help me ter git ther girl?"

"Oh, yes; who is she?"

"Ther darter of ther landlord o' ther Hash House."

"Pretty?"

"Waal, she are ther Angil o' Last Chance, and we hain't ther boys ter name a gal thet who hain't up in ther angil biz fer looks and acts."

"Have you any plan on hand for her capture?"

"I has."

"Then I will aid you," was the response of the unknown.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN DOUBT.

THE miners of Last Chance went to their labors at an early hour, and only the hangers-on of the camps, and the idlers were to be seen about the various saloons and hotels during the day, with the exception perhaps of men who were known as gamblers, and the business men of the place.

So it was that the fact that the man who Poker Pete had said was not an army officer, but instead the outlaw Chief of the Devil's Dozen, had left the camps under cover of the night was not generally known until nightfall.

The dead had been buried, with a small attendance, for the two men supposed to be soldiers, but accused of being outlaws, held no in-

terest in Last Chance to the people there, and Digger Dave was by no means a popular man.

Eucher Charlie was laid up in his cabin, under the care of the "Doctor," who was a character in his way.

That he had been a physician at some time there was no doubt, for he was not a practitioner, and had amputated limbs and dressed wounds with some skill; but he also was the barber of Last Chance, and he had what was called a drug store in his tonsorial shop.

His medicines consisted of quack compounds and mixtures of his own, and it was believed that one was as sure death as the other.

But the miners took his medicines and paid liberally for them, and "Doctor Rhubarb," as the boys called him, prospered and grew rich.

The doctor also officiated as parson when one was needed, and though he was always meddling in every one's affairs, he was never killed for the simple reason the man whom he angered recalled the fact in time so that there was no one to take his place, and he accordingly aimed to miss.

This caused the cunning doctor to say that he had had more hair-breadth escapes than any man alive, and I guess he was right.

Doctor Rhubarb had been called in to patch up Eucher Charlie, and had pronounced his wound to be a slight one.

He had also had a call to the Hash House to see Bunco Bill, for that worthy had been feeling very sore in the morning after his adventure.

He had told the doctor that he had slipped and fallen on the hill and cut his head.

"You are a great liar, Bunco Bill; but it is not for me to doubt you, only that blow was given with a club and if you don't know who did it, I'd advise you to keep your eyes open, for you've got an enemy around."

"Who took these stitches in it for you and dressed it?"

"Why?"

"Because it is the work of a surgeon who understands his biz."

"Landlord Sampson."

"Again you lie as sweetly as a cooing dove, for I asked Sampson what ailed you as I came in and he said he did not know you were sick."

"Well it is none of your business who did it."

"I see; I tumble to the racket, though you did not tumble."

"Well, it's none of my business, as you say, only there was no need for you to lie about it, but simply to let me go to work and doctor up your hard head."

"See here, old Rhubarb, I don't want you to call me a liar any more, or I'll plug you."

"If you do, you'll die yourself with no one to look after this very dangerous wound of yours."

"I am not sure but that the skull is fractured and inflammation of the brain may set in and—"

"Well I'll get the Man of Mexico to doctor me, for I don't believe you are any good anyhow."

"Ah! it was the Man from Mexico that sewed up this wound then?"

"Well, well, and maybe he made it too; a bad man to fool with, Bunco, but a gentleman from 'wayback all the same."

"Well, let me fix you up, and I suppose I am to report that you are only down with a headache?"

"Yes."

"You don't wish it known that you have been knocked in the head and left for dead?"

"Who says so?"

"I say that this wound stunned you, and you lay like a log after it for some time."

"Well, somebody did hit me, who I do not know, and the Man from Mexico found me and brought me here and dressed the wound; but I do not wish this known."

"I see; but my charge is extra for lying, Bunco Bill, and as inflammation may set in and render you delirious, eventually killing you, please pay me in advance. Twenty-five dollars, please, is my moderate charge."

"Twenty-five dollars is a swindle, old Rhubarb."

"There, don't worry or you will make yourself ill; but pay me the money."

"I have not got it, but I'll give you an order on Dick Deadly Hand for it."

"On who?"

"Deadly Hand."

"You are a fool as well as a liar, Bunco Bill."

"Why you might as well tell me to tickle a mule's hind leg as to present an order for money on Dick Deadly Hand."

"He'd kill me."

"I wish that he would."

"No, no, I never visit patients with contagious diseases or go near a fool who goes armed like that man."

"You have the money here, so pay me."

"With a sigh Bunco Bill paid the bill and the doctor left with the remark:

"I'll drop in to-morrow again, Bunco, and if you are dead there'll be no charge, but I guess you'll be all right if fever does not come on."

"Keep quiet and don't worry. Ta ta."

With this the man of medicine went out of

the room just in time to escape a boot which the angry clerk hurled at him.

Then in came Sling Slang with the remark:

"Missee Steller wantee know if sickie, and she helpee you?"

"Thank Miss Stella for me, Sling Slang, and say that I am only suffering from a very severe sick headache, but will be better soon."

"Headee brokee?"

"No! you Chinee fool."

"Allee lightee," and Sling Slang departed.

Then Landlord Sampson dropped in to see his clerk and was most kind to him, not once discovering that the bandage about his head was on account of a wound, but believing the "sick headache fable" which Bunco Bill told him was the matter.

As the miners began to assemble in the saloons for the evening games and carousals, the conversation turned by general consent upon the happenings of the night before.

Poker Pete was said to be laid up at his cabin in a bruised condition, from his contact with the Man from Mexico the night before, and what had become of the strange officer was the general query.

The whisper had gone around that he had left Last Chance during the night, and somehow many believed that after all Poker Pete might have been right in his accusation.

But then there was the recognition of the Man from Mexico to show that the officer was really whom he represented himself to be.

In the midst of the talk at the Live and Let Live, Butterfly dropped in.

He was known to all, but was not a regular attendant at the saloon of Ross Sampson, for he frequented all of the places in Last Chance.

It was also known that Butterfly had one time been a captive to the Devil's Dozen and suspected of having money, he had been forced to pay a good ransom before he could get away from them.

So upon his entrance of the saloon a number of miners called to him to join him at their tables.

At one table sat Sampson the landlord, and with him Dick Deadly Hand and several others, for there was no game going on among them.

Butterfly took the only seat left there, and called for drinks for the party, while he said in his off-hand way:

"What's up to-night, pards?"

"We is talkin' of the officer as was here last night, and whom Poker Pete swore was the Cap'n o' ther Devil's Dozen," said Dick Deadly Hand.

"Well, Poker Pete ought to have known, for he is said to have seen the outlaw chief."

"He said he did know, but the man had papers as an army officer on a special service."

"That should have settled it, landlord," returned Butterfly.

"And the Man from Mexico recognized him as an army officer, too," continued Ross Sampson.

"Then what are the boys kicking about?"

"Poker Pete still swears it was the outlaw chief, so as you have seen him we wished to ask you about the man."

"Describe him, landlord."

"A tall man, with a dark, handsome face, piercing eyes and a quiet, lazy manner about him."

"He was in a fatigue uniform, and looked the thorough soldier."

"That is like him, and no mistake, but if the Man from Mexico says it was not the Chief of the Devil's Dozen, it was not, and that settles it, for he knows," and with this remark, which but added to the curiosity of all, Butterfly would say no more.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LOST HEIR.

BACK to the elegant home of the beautiful heiress, Myra Weston, I would have my reader accompany me, for the maiden whose father died by the hand of her lover, almost upon the eve of her wedding-day, is not to be dropped from these pages.

People wondered much that Myra Weston seemed to feel so deeply her father's death, that she shut herself up in her home, and lived the life of a recluse.

All but a few servants were dismissed, and the house looked to be deserted, for the heiress received no visitors, and went nowhere beyond the limits of her own spacious grounds.

Those servants who remained with her, when questioned, would only say that the young lady preferred to be alone.

It had been known by all that she was soon to marry Gabriel Godfrey, and yet why, on account of her father's fearful death, and her lover's, for he was supposed to be dead also, killed in the steamboat explosion, she had determined to live a life of loneliness, young, rich, and beautiful as she was, no one could tell, and the fearful truth not a soul could guess at.

A trip did Myra take to the city for a few days, after her father's funeral, and some time after that registered letters arrived for her with quite frequency, and then ceased coming.

Her father's attorney had spent a couple of

days at the mansion, turning over to the heiress, who was of age, her large property, and since that time not a stranger or friend had crossed the threshold of her home.

The truth of Myra's visit to the city, and the registered letters, was that she had put detectives upon the track of her lover, and had received their reports in full as they unfolded his evil life.

This convinced her that her eyes had not deceived her, nor had her ears—her former lover was indeed the murderer of her father, and just the man, from his past career, who sought her for her money, and to get gold to marry with, and keep up the belief that he was rich, had committed the crime that he did.

She did not believe that Gabriel Godfrey had meditated murder.

She knew that he had brought the money he had collected for her father home to him, and, seeing where it had been put, had determined to get it, by robbing him at night, well knowing that not a shadow of suspicion would ever fall upon him.

"But, detected by her father, he had taken life to save himself.

Then, believing himself unsuspected, he had started upon his return home.

But he had had an accomplice in his crime, so that the robbery must have been planned.

Who was this accomplice?

That Myra Weston could not fathom; but, with her father in his grave, and her lover proven to be a robber and a murderer, and, as the detectives had shown, a very wicked man, she had retired from society, and seemed content to live the life of a recluse.

It had been believed that her heart was broken by losing father and lover so soon together, and yet one to have seen Myra Weston would not have thought that she was dying of grief.

If anything, she had become more beautiful, and yet at times her face wore a look that was positively stern, and she appeared like one who yet held some firm purpose in life.

Her servants never saw her weeping, and she was ever gentle and kind to those about her, but they knew that she suffered greatly.

One afternoon, nearly a year after the death of her father, a visitor arrived at the home of the heiress.

He was denied admission by the servant, but, taking out a card, wrote on it:

"It is most important that I should see Miss Weston."

This gained him admission to the elegant parlors, so long deserted, and soon after Myra swept into the room and bowed in a queenly way, while she said:

"You wished to see me, Mr. Spencer?"

"Yes, Miss Weston, and I regret to bring up unpleasant and sad recollections by referring to the past, but may I ask if you can in any way aid me in my search to discover if my former pupil, and later client, is yet alive."

"I refer to Mr. Gabriel Godfrey."

Myra's face paled at his words, but she remained calm, only, as though to command herself, she motioned to a chair, and sat down herself.

She had heard of Samuel Spencer from her lover.

He had spoken of him often as his boyhood's tutor, and how they had roamed about the world together, and what a noble man he was.

She even knew that Mr. Spencer had married, and, having studied law, had begun practice in the town near Gabriel Godfrey's home.

Now he came to her and asked her to aid in the finding out if Gabriel Godfrey was yet living.

Having obtained complete mastery of herself, Myra now saw before her a handsome man of forty, with a strong face, full of intelligence and nobility of nature, and one that she could trust wholly, she knew.

He was dressed in black, and a band of crepe was around his hat, she noticed, as though he was in mourning for some loved one.

"Do you mean, Mr. Spencer, that there is a doubt of Mr. Godfrey's death?" she asked, almost overcome by a choking sensation in her throat.

"Yes, there is a doubt, but a slight one, and one which would not have come up but for the fact that an aunt of Mr. Godfrey's, who was supposed to be poor, has died and left him a large fortune."

"She ran off and married a poor man, and her brother, the father of Gabriel Godfrey alone of her family befriended her, and she left his son her fortune, for her husband became enormously rich before his death."

"Living apart as she did from her people, she did not know of Gabriel's death, as it is believed, and having no children left him her heir."

"And you are searching for proof that he is dead?"

"Yes, Miss Weston, for I do not believe that he is."

"May I ask your motive for so believing?"

"May I ask, Miss Weston, first if there was not some misunderstanding between you and Gabriel?"

"Yes, had he lived and been as rich as Croesus, I never would have married him," she

said, with a sudden fierceness that startled the lawyer.

"I found Mr. Gabriel Godfrey out, to tell the truth, for he was living a double life, I discovered, and so I despised where I had loved him, and I may say that living or dead I hate him."

Samuel Spencer was amazed, but said in response:

"This being the case, I may as well tell you that Gabriel had a good reason for being supposed to be dead, and your words but add to my belief that he is not."

"At first I believed he was dead, as he did not marry you, which he told me he left home to do."

"Then I doubted again, from some reason, and as his father had befriended me in early life, I did not wish a stain to fall upon his good name through his son's dishonor, so I paid certain debts owed by Gabriel, though I had to mortgage my wife's property to do so."

"My poor wife soon after died, so I had no one to care for but myself, and I am glad to have kept dishonor from the name of my good patron."

"Mr. Spencer, I believe you to be the noble man that Mr. Godfrey always said you were; but let me offer my sympathy in the loss of your wife."

"I thank you, Miss Weston; but here I am talking of myself, when I wished to know if in any way you could aid me in finding out the truth about Gabriel Godfrey."

"What reasons have you for believing him alive, may I ask?"

"I have seen the register of the boat, and everybody was found and identified except him, while one or two were certain that they saw him swimming unhurt after the explosion, and land on the other shore."

"I saw a woodman who lived on the other shore, and he said a man came to his house dripping wet, and bought a horse from him and departed, he knew not where."

"This man answered Gabriel's description thoroughly."

"Mr. Spencer, I, too, am convinced that Gabriel Godfrey did not die that day of the boat explosion," said Myra, and Samuel Spencer felt that she could tell him more than he knew about the fate of the man he wished to trace.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COMPACT.

"MISS WESTON, it was a long time before I could make up my mind to come to you, for I did not wish to give you pain; but I felt that if Gabriel Godfrey was not dead, he was hiding from the law on account of his deeds, not knowing that I had paid the notes he had forged indorsements on, and, if alive, perhaps you would know of his whereabouts."

As the lawyer was speaking, Myra was opening her desk, which she had sent a servant after, and now took out a letter.

"Mr. Spencer, I was determined to know Gabriel Godfrey as he really was, so I went to the city and put detectives upon his track."

"One of these visited you, but could learn nothing from you, for you would not betray your friend."

"I had given him a photograph of Mr. Godfrey, and he had found him out to be a gambler by profession, and much else that was bad."

"Yesterday I had a letter from this detective, and I will read it to you."

Then aloud Myra read as follows:

"I will recall myself to the recollection of Miss Weston, by stating that I am Homer Hume, the detective whom she put on the track of Gabriel Godfrey a year ago, and who was reported to have been killed when the Western Belle was blown up on the Mississippi."

"My motive for writing is to say that the photograph Miss Weston gave me of Mr. Godfrey so well impressed itself upon my memory that it is indelibly stamped there, and having just returned from a Secret Service trip to Texas, I wish to say that I saw Mr. Godfrey in San Antonio."

"He was dressed as a Mexican, and was gambling, but I knew his face at once."

"To make sure I was right, I approached him and said suddenly:

"Hello, Godfrey! I thought you were dead."

"He started, turned livid, and it was an instant before he could reply, when he said:

"You are mistaken, sir, for my name is not Gabriel Godfrey—I am a Mexican."

"He spoke with an accent, and you note when I simply called him Godfrey, he said that his name was not Gabriel Godfrey."

"I simply give you this occurrence for what you may deem it worth to you, if you still wish to pursue the gentleman in question, and would add that that very night the man left San Antonio, going to Mexico, and he sold out his interests in San Antonio at a sacrifice."

"If it was not Gabriel Godfrey, why should he do this?"

"Should you care to put some one on the track of Godfrey, please communicate with

"Yours with respect,

"HOMER HUME,
Detective."

"In response to this letter, Mr. Spencer, I sent Mr. Hume a check, thanking him for his trouble and kindness, and telling him I cared to know nothing more about Mr. Godfrey."

"But what do you think as to his being alive now?"

"That letter is proof positive that he is, Miss Weston."

"So I am convinced; but what will you do in the matter?"

"May I go and see this man Hume in your name?"

"Yes; but your motive?"

"To learn all I can from him, and then hunt for the poor fellow, who, if he has erred, I hope will realize it, and with the fortune left him, return home and live a life of honor."

Samuel Spencer saw a strange light come into the eyes of Myra Weston, and yet he could not understand it, for she remained perfectly calm.

"He has done you no wrong then, Mr. Spencer?"

"He owes me quite a large sum of money, Miss Weston, but he will pay that, I know."

"Still it is not for what he owes me that I am after, for I have a paying practice and no one to look after but myself; but I wish to redeem Gabriel from his evil life and bring him back to one of honor, as I am really attached to him."

"May I ask if there are any pecuniary obligations on your part toward his late father?"

"None, for all I received from him I paid back; but the gratitude I feel for him I can never underrate."

"And Mr. Gabriel Godfrey's indebtedness to you?"

"Do you mean how large a sum it amounts to?"

"Yes."

"Just ten thousand dollars, counting the mortgage on my little home, and fifteen hundred I raised for him just before his supposed death."

"He has other debts?"

"Oh yes, but that covers all to me."

"You spoke of some notes?"

"Yes, which I took from the bank."

"The indorsements on those notes were forged, I believe?"

"I regret to say they were, and it was to escape punishment for this that the poor fellow let it be thought that he was dead."

"Have you those notes, Mr. Spencer?"

"Yes, I have them here with me, for, strange to say, I have never destroyed them, but kept them in my leather wallet, fearing others might get hold of them, in case I should die suddenly."

"Mr. Spencer, I will give you a check for ten thousand dollars, clearing up the debt of Gabriel Godfrey to you, and will take those notes to keep myself."

Samuel Spencer was astonished.

Lawyer that he was he could not understand this beautiful woman.

She had said that she had hated Gabriel Godfrey and now she was paying his debts.

"May I ask why you do this, Miss Weston?"

"First tell me what becomes of his inheritance in case you do not find him?"

"It goes to a charitable object after three years."

"I see. Well, you need not search for Gabriel Godfrey, for I will have him found."

"It is my pleasure to let him know of his good fortune, and show him his forged notes in my possession, and let him see what I have done for him."

"Do you understand, Mr. Spencer?" and Myra Weston smiled sweetly.

He supposed that after all Myra loved Gabriel and doing what she did would win him back.

So he said:

"I will give you the notes, Miss Weston, but you need not pay the money, for it is a large sum, you know."

"Yes, I know, but I have a very large fortune, and am my own mistress, having only myself to be responsible to, Mr. Spencer."

"I will give you my check for ten thousand, take your receipt in full for the debts paid of Mr. Godfrey, and those forged notes."

"This will square the financial matters against Mr. Godfrey, as far as you are concerned, and I will guarantee to find that gentleman for you, so that you can continue on in your practice."

"What do you say, Mr. Spencer?"

"I can but thank you, Miss Weston, and agree to your terms."

"And I thank you, sir, for doing so; but tell me, please, what is the amount of this fortune left to Mr. Gabriel Godfrey?"

"Something over half a million."

"Indeed! a most handsome inheritance," and Myra looked pleased at the good fortune of her former lover, and soon after Samuel Spencer took his departure with the beautiful face of Myra Weston constantly haunting him, waking or dreaming, in spite of the sorrow he felt in his heart for his dead wife.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE STRANGE HORSEMAN.

AFTER the departure of Lawyer Spencer from her home, Myra sat down to her desk and wrote a letter which was addressed to

"HOMER HUME,

Detective."

She wrote a very long letter and it numbered many questions to be answered, as to when he had seen the Mexican, who denied being Gabriel

Godfrey, and what he was doing in San Antonio, Texas?

She also wished to know just how long he had been there, what name he had borne while there, and the names of any one there who had known him?

Again she desired to know where he had crossed the Rio Grande, and all other information regarding him.

In conclusion she said:

"Circumstances have occurred since my answering your kind letter, and stating that I cared to know nothing more of Mr. Godfrey, which may cause me to look him up, and I desire to do so through one whom I know well, who goes to Texas soon."

Then she put a very liberal check within the letter and dispatched it.

The answer came in a few days, thanking her for her liberality in both letters, and stating that Mr. Homer Hume had not looked for a pecuniary reward in writing her, but had done so, hoping if she wished to find Mr. Gabriel Godfrey, she would select him, Detective Hume, to track him down.

He also gave all desired information in answer to the numbered questions as follows:

"No. 1. It was just five weeks ago to-night since I met Mr. Gabriel in the Plaza Saloon in San Antonio, Texas.

"No. 2. He was dressed as a Mexican, wore his hair long, falling upon his shoulders, and a dark mustache.

"No. 3. He was known as Don Gabriello.

"No. 4. He was known as a Mexican ranchero, who was fond of gambling, and he had a herd of Mexican ponies in San Antonio, which he had brought in to sell, and these he sold that night for a small cash price, compared with their worth, to the landlord of his hotel.

"No. 5. He went up the Rio Grande and crossed at the ranch of a Mexican by the name of De Silva; this I learned by dogging him to the Rio Grande.

"No. 6. He had been known in and about San Antonio for some six months, and when he first came there was said to be poor, and a gambler.

"This I learned from those who had known him since his first coming there.

"If Miss Weston's friend will seek Juakin Sandez in San Antonio, at the Plaza Saloon, he will find one who may give him more information regarding Mr. Godfrey, and perhaps aid in his finding him."

Such was the detective's letter, and as Myra Weston read it, a strange look came into her face, while she muttered:

"Miss Weston's friend will find him.

"Yes, Gabriel Godfrey must be found."

As she was putting the letter carefully away, a servant came in hastily to say that a traveler's horse had fallen with him and hurt him seriously, if not fatally.

"It was at the bridge, miss, near the south gate, and the horse's hoof broke through a hole and he fell, throwing his rider against the rail.

"Dan saw it, miss, and brought him in."

"He did right, Sophy, and do you prepare a room for him and send for the doctor at once," and Myra went to see the unfortunate man who had been forced upon her as a guest.

He lay unconscious where the workmen had placed him upon the piazza, and Myra beheld a man who had the appearance of being a Westerner, for he was heavily bearded, wore a broad-brimmed hat, and his pants were stuck in the tops of his boots.

He had received a severe blow on the head, for there was a cut there over the temple, showing the bone.

But he was well dressed and looked the gentleman, though had he been a tramp Myra Weston would never have turned him from her door.

He was taken to a pleasant room, and the doctor soon after arrived and brought him to, but said that he must remain perfectly quiet until the result of the injury should be known.

Thus days passed away and the stranger had been tenderly cared for.

But he had told his nurse one morning that he would be able to depart the next day, and so wished for an interview with the fair lady who had been so good to him.

He arose as Myra entered the library and bowing low said in a voice that showed emotion:

"Miss Weston, I beg to thank you for all your kindness to me."

"Pray, sir, do not speak of it, for I have been most happy to have served you, I assure you, and I hope you will not venture to depart until thoroughly able to do so, for you look pale and ill yet."

"No, I am well, physically, and well able to go on my way."

"In fact I must do so; but Miss Weston, I deserve not from your hands the kindness I have received."

"And why, sir, for you were a fellow being in distress?"

He was silent a moment and seemed deeply moved.

Then he walked to the window and looked out, and Myra saw that he was seeking to control some emotion that threatened to get the better of him.

She felt ill at ease, and was about to speak, when he turned toward her and asked:

"Miss Weston, may I intrust to you a secret?"

She looked surprised, and for a moment felt that he had suffered mentally from his injury.

"A secret, sir?"

"Yes, may I place such confidence in you, that it would be as though I put my life in your keeping, for I have something to tell you?"

"To tell me?" and the arched brows were raised with surprise.

"Yes, for I am not unknown to you—we have met before."

"And where, may I ask?"

"Do you remember when in the city with your father, something over a year ago, you met Mr. Gabriel Godfrey and a friend one afternoon, and he introduced me to you?"

"Ah yes, you are Mr. Reynolds; but I saw you for a few minutes only and failed to recognize you, sir," and Myra appeared annoyed at again meeting one who had known Gabriel Godfrey.

"I am Redford Reynolds, Miss Weston, and am wholly unworthy to stand in your presence; but I feel humbled by your kindness to me, and I wish to make a confession to you if you will only pledge me your word that it shall be a secret between us, that you will not betray me."

"Will you so pledge me, Miss Weston?"

"I cannot understand, sir, why I should know any secret you may possess, and I frankly tell you that I care not to hear of a past that is filled only with regret and sorrow, if it is of Mr. Gabriel Godfrey that you wish to speak," and Myra spoke in a manner that was frigid.

But the man seemed not to mind her cold manner, but said:

"It is of Mr. Gabriel Godfrey that I would speak, and of myself as well."

"It is to tell you how little I deserve your kindness toward me, to ask you to forgive me a wrong toward you, and to make known that which you do not know, and which may place you on your guard against one whom you expect no harm from, but who is capable of doing you a great injury."

"Will you hear what I have to say, Miss Weston?"

Impressed by the man's strange and earnest manner, Myra answered promptly:

"Yes."

"And as I place myself in your power, will you give me the pledge not to betray me?"

After a moment of hesitation, Myra answered, firmly:

"I give you the pledge."

At her words a smile passed over the man's face and he walked over and stood near her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MAN'S CONFESSION.

"ARE we likely to be disturbed, Miss Weston?" asked the stranger, and he glanced somewhat uneasily toward the door.

Myra arose and walked into the adjoining room and thence through the hall back into the library, and said:

"There is no one near, sir, to hear what you have to say."

She felt no fear of the man, but she seemed to be impressed with the belief that he had something to tell her that she should know.

He had waited for her return somewhat uneasily, and as she took a seat on one side of the center-table, he sat down near her.

For full a minute he did not speak, but Myra calmly awaited his pleasure.

Then he said:

"With your promise, Miss Weston, I can speak to you without reserve, for I know that I am safe."

"I have said that I was unworthy your notice, and I am, and certainly your kindness I do not deserve."

"I have said that Gabriel Godfrey was my friend."

"I suppose I may call him so, and—"

"Does your story concern Mr. Godfrey, sir, for if not we will not refer to him."

"It does concern him, you and myself."

"But for him I would not now be telling you what I do."

"Gabriel Godfrey and I were boys together, I being the eldest by several years."

"We went off to boarding-school together, for our families lived near each other, and were very intimate."

"While at school I got into a quarrel with a fellow-student, and I was in the wrong, I admit, and I asked Gabriel to arrange the matter for me."

"There had been a coldness between us on account of a young girl, the professor's daughter, whom we both fell in love with, and because she showed a preference for me, for she was older than he, being seventeen, while he was but sixteen."

"But I went to him in my trouble, as having been my best friend, and asked him to offer my apology."

"He returned to me with the report that my apology was not accepted, and that I would have to fight my adversary."

"Miss Weston, that moment was laid the corner-stone of my future life for evil, when all

had seemed to me before that for good, and I had ambition to become a good and great man."

"I was in the hands of my friend, and yielded, so I was forced into an affair of honor."

"Gabriel was my second, and I met my adversary one evening at sunset near the grounds of the academy, and he fell under my fire, for I was a dead shot, and Gabriel whispered to me that he had heard him say to his second that he intended to kill me."

"Then I learned from the honor of the other second that some evil had been done, for his agreement with Gabriel was to put only powder in the pistols, and have us shake hands after we fired."

"The pistol I had had a bullet in it, and his had not, and it was supposed that I had dropped the ball into mine after it was handed to me, and guiltless though I was, I fled for my life in dismay."

"Two days after I found that the pistol I had was not mine, but my adversary's, and I knew that the pistols had been changed in some way."

"I fled to the far West and became a wanderer, and with the stigma upon me of having purposely killed my opponent, while Gabriel was taken from the academy by his father and placed under a tutor to travel with him."

"Well, I went from bad to worse, Miss Weston; but I returned to my home over a year ago, hoping to see my parents."

"Alas! they were both dead; and in a gambling saloon in the city one night I came face to face upon Gabriel Godfrey."

"I knew him at a glance, in spite of the years that had passed since we met, and my long beard prevented his recognizing me."

"I made myself known to him, for I had lost my last dollar and was in distress, and I wished to learn of my home, and more, of the sweet girl I had so dearly loved when at the academy."

"He turned pale when I told him who I was, and when I seemed friendly toward him, invited me to his rooms."

"Then he told me how my parents had died, and that my little sweetheart had gone into a convent soon after my flight."

"I asked him about that fatal bullet in the pistol, and after a while he boldly confessed that he had intended it the other way—that, jealous of me, he had hoped my adversary would kill me, but somehow he had picked up the wrong weapon to hand to me."

"It was hard for me not to spring upon him then, and kill him, Miss Weston; but I restrained my anger, laughed his trick off, and asked him for money."

"He told me to help him out in a plan he had, and he would give me a thousand dollars."

"That plan he told me, as I promised to aid him, was to rob an old gentleman who had asked him to collect a large sum in the city for him."

"He told me that the amount was ten thousand dollars, all of which he needed, but that he would give me one thousand in cash, pay my expenses, and six weeks after give me four thousand more, to make me an equal sharer with him."

"He explained all to me, gave me a plan of the house, and I was to go with him to the town, await for him at night, while he visited the old gentleman and gave him the money, and discovered where he put it, and when he came away I was to meet him, enter the house with false keys, and get the money."

"Our plan worked well, for he collected the money, and we reached the town, this town, Miss Weston, and I in disguise, came here to your house as a locksmith, and got the plan of front door lock, fitting a key."

"That night I met Gabriel Godfrey after he had paid his visit here, and was ready for the work."

"But he said, knowing the house as he did, and just where the money had been put, that he had better return, and so I gave him my hat and cloak and he departed."

"It was not long before he returned in haste and fearfully alarmed, and he told me he had been attacked by the master of the house, and in self-defense had been forced to kill him, while he had not gotten the money."

"We returned to the hotel and took the first train away, and the day after he borrowed some money and gave me several hundred dollars, and with it I returned West."

"On my way I stopped at a little town to await a westward-bound train, and there I learned from a paper of the blowing up of the steamer Western Belle, and the death of Gabriel Godfrey."

"I felt that he had met a just fate, for he had been the cause of my sorrow and misfortunes, my wrecked life, and he had slain the father of the lady whom he had expected to marry, and was at the time robbing of his money."

"I went on my way westward and—but I need not tell you what I became, what I am; but I grew no better, I am pained to tell you."

"I one night entered a camp and began to play cards, and who should come in but the man I believed to be dead."

"We recognized each other at once— But you are ill, Miss Weston."

"Oh, no, merely a temporary weakness, I assure you."

"I am most deeply interested in your story, Mr. Reynolds, I believe you said your name was?"

"Yes, Redford Reynolds, it was, and upon it I have brought only disgrace," was the bitter reply.

"Pray go on, sir, with your most interesting story, or confession I may call it."

"A confession it is, and one of crime, one of a crime-stained man to a pure, noble woman, whose presence I now feel myself unworthy to be in."

"But let me continue, for I wish to relieve you of my company as soon as possible, so will hasten to the end of my wretched confession," and Redford Reynolds's face revealed that he felt keenly the situation in which he found himself.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PLOT FOR GOLD.

"I AM ready to hear what else you have to say, Mr. Reynolds," said Myra Weston, after a long pause, and her words brought Redford Reynolds back to himself, for he had seemed lost in deep and bitter memory which caused him to forget that he was in the presence of any one.

He started and said nervously:

"Oh, yes, I beg pardon."

Then he went on, in the same low, earnest tone in which he had before spoken:

"I came East before urged by the prickings of conscience, and to see my old parents and the old home."

"Had they been alive perhaps my life would have then and there changed, if they would only have believed that I was not as guilty as I seemed, and I would have made a confession of all to them."

"But they were dead, the old home had been sold, and their wealth had gone to charity, for their unworthy son had been properly cut off without a dollar."

"Then it was that I became more reckless than ever before, and I assure you, Miss Weston, I was ready for any deed of evil."

"I met Gabriel Godfrey and I was led into his scheme to rob your father."

"I have told you how that happened."

"Then I met my evil shadow again in the far West."

"He seemed, as before, alarmed to see me; but as he saw that I knew him at a glance, he called to me and we went to his cabin and had a long talk together."

"I found that he was in hard luck, for his gambling had not brought him in much money, and he was in for any game that would win."

"He told me that he had escaped when the Western Belle blew up and was glad to be considered dead."

"But he was going to take to the road, he said."

"May I ask what that was, Mr. Reynolds?" and Myra seemed more and more interested in the story.

"To become a road-agent, an outlaw, in fact, who robs stage-coaches and travelers on the Overland."

"I understand now, and Mr. Godfrey intended to become an outlaw, a road-agent?"

"Yes, or to go with me and become a dweller among the red-skins, a renegade to our people, as I was, and am."

"But he had a plan, he told me, to make money for us both."

"That plan he told me he would let me into on equal shares, if I would do the work."

"I needed money, and so I agreed."

"The plot of Gabriel Godfrey was to have me come East and rob a house."

"He knew that a certain rich heiress had an old relative in the West who had been a miner."

"This miner he had met, and he knew that he intended to go East within a year and look up a niece there, and leave her his fortune."

"He had heard the heiress speak of this eccentric uncle, and he gleaned from the miner all he could about himself and his family."

"Gabriel Godfrey then told me that I was strangely like the miner, and if I was to go East I could pass myself off for the uncle of the heiress, and thus leaving the home rob it of the silver, of which there was plenty, and the money and jewels the lady always kept in the mansion."

"He said I could, without doubt, thus secure twenty to thirty thousand dollars in booty, and sharing it with him we could then keep together as comrades."

"I consented, and I came East for the purpose of carrying out the plot."

"I secured me a horse at the nearest town, and you recognize now who it was that I was to rob."

"I came here armed with names and dates, and was to play the part of your uncle, your father's brother, who went to sea as a lad, and afterward became a miner in California, and whom you only heard of once in several years."

"This was my plot, Miss Weston, and it was, as you see, to rob you."

"It was the plot of Gabriel Godfrey, who had killed your father, to rob you of your money and jewels, and that he has no conscience, I will tell you that he said you had a miniature likeness of your brother, set with precious gems, that was immensely valuable, and this would bring a handsome sum for us, while the likeness we could burn."

"I carried out the plot as far as buying a horse and saddle was concerned, and posting myself upon all your family matters."

"Then I set out, and the result you know, for a good fortune to you, caused my horse to fall in the bridge, and hurl me with force against the side of the bridge."

"When I revived I found myself in your home, where I had been given a warm welcome by you, and was cared for most nobly."

"I tried to school myself to do the work I had started upon; but your sad, beautiful face troubled me to the heart, your kindness won me to my better self, and I decided to tell you all."

"I decided to tell you that the man you have cause to fear is not dead, but alive, and, for some reason your bitter foe."

"It came to me to tell you that he it was who killed your father, and fled for his life, afterward allowing you and all others to believe that he was dead."

"I struggled hard between my longing for gold and evil, and a sense of duty toward you, and then right triumphed and I vowed to myself that I would make a clean breast of it to you, and put you on your guard against one who you know now will prove your bitterest foe."

"As for myself, I will return to Gabriel Godfrey, and I will tell him that I could not get the booty, and that if he failed once, so did I."

"I will let him go his way and I will go mine, but I will be happy in having warned you, having told you all."

"Now, Miss Weston, you have my story, my confession in full, and I have your pledge that you will not betray me as I am, that I may go my way unmolested."

"Yes, and I will keep my pledge; but you will tell me where I can find this man, Gabriel Godfrey?"

"No, I cannot do that, Miss Weston, for though I have done what I could for your sweet sake, I yet would not betray him even to you."

"He is a road-agent, you said?"

"Yes."

"On the far Western border?"

"He is."

"You will not say where?"

"No, I cannot."

"You may be right, sir; but is he known on the border by his real name?"

"No, he is not."

"And he makes his money by robbing stage-coaches and travelers?"

"Yes, Miss Weston, and by gambling."

"With whom?"

"Miners and bordermen in general."

"Then he is allowed to go into the camps?"

"Oh, yes, for no one knows him as an outlaw, and he goes into the camps to gamble, and also to get news to aid him in his work."

"As he is almost always masked, few people see his face, and those who do are not acquainted with him, and so when he goes into the camps there is no one to recognize him, and thus he can gamble in the mines with the very men he may rob upon the trails."

"This is not a charming picture you paint of Mr. Godfrey, Mr. Reynolds."

"It is a truthful one, however, Miss Weston."

"I do not doubt that, sir; but may I ask if Mr. Godfrey kills also as well as robs?"

"Oh, yes, he does not allow life to stand between him and the getting of gold."

"Thank you, sir; but is there more for you to tell?"

"Nothing, and I will now depart."

"One moment, sir."

"Yes, Miss Weston."

"As you failed to carry out this plot to rob me, and I consider besides your story to be a most valuable one, will you permit me to pay you—"

"No! no! not that, not that! I am a bad man, Miss Weston, but not so bad as to take gold from your hand that saved my life, for the doctor told me but for your sending for him, and your good nursing of me, I would have died."

"Good-by, Miss Weston, and wicked man though I am, let me say God bless you!"

Myra Weston made no reply, and the man hastily arose, bowed and left the room.

Ten minutes after when she came out of the library, she found that he had departed from the mansion.

Calling to a servant, she wrote a dispatch and ordered him to take it once to the telegraph office, and then to find out which way the stranger had gone, but not to let him know he was following him.

The dispatch was addressed to Detective Homer Hume, and read simply:

"Come with all haste to my home, and be prepared for a long journey."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STARTED ON THE TRAIL.

MR. HOMER HUME was what might be called a "born detective."

He had been intended for the ministry, but there was an overflow of spirits in his nature not becoming in the pulpit, and so he had switched off to medicine, to shake that also and dabble in law.

Here he found what he was good for, as he was interested in a case that was most intricate, and which had put the lawyers and Secret Service men at fault.

He asked for a week's leave from his service, started off secretly on the trail, and in just seven days put in an appearance at the office with the untangled threads in his possession.

The chief of detectives was there in the office, to give up the case, when Mr. Homer Hume put in an appearance, and showed his hand, so to speak.

It was certain that he held a hand full of trumps, and the chief in his admiration said at once that he was born for a detective, and offered him a place at one hundred per month and expenses.

Mr. Hume was reading law, and getting just fifteen dollars a week, so he decided at once to become a Secret Service man, drew his reward of two thousand, offered for the unraveling of the case, and entered upon his duties at once as "Detective Homer Hume, who run down the famous Dawson Diamond Case."

Homer Hume was a man to attract attention, or to go unnoticed through any crowd, just as he pleased, for he could go further than the leopard, for he could change his spots.

One might meet him in the city as a country parson in the morning, in the afternoon see him as a well-to-do business man, with gold spectacles and corpulent form, and at night behold him standing about the hotels looking like a Bohemian poet hunting for a theme for verse, and never suspect him of being the same individual.

He studied disguises thoroughly, and practiced "making-up" as untiringly as an actor.

He was a man of medium size, with a wiry frame, strong as iron, and a face that was intelligent and wonderful for its facial expressions, while he could contort his features to a marvelous degree.

He was naturally a gentleman, but could become a loafer and rowdy at will.

Such was the young man who sent his card in to Miss Myra Weston the next day after her telegram.

She at once went into the parlor, and started back as she saw a sad-faced young man in clerical attire with the look of one who had come for a contribution for a chapel to be built in the wilds of Africa for the benefit of the heathen, forgetting all about the benighted Christians in our midst.

"There is some mistake, sir, for you are not the gentleman I expected to see," said Myra, coldly.

"Yes, Miss Weston, I am Homer Hume, Detective, and at your service; but I do not appear to be the one you met a year and a half ago, as I am made up for the purpose of catching a bogus preacher now in your town."

"Another man was to be sent, but getting your telegram, I came."

Myra wondered that a man could so change his appearance, but she was convinced that he was none other than the one she had before had dealings with, though he did not look it.

So she said:

"I sent for you, Mr. Hume, to give you an important mission to do."

"I am wholly at your service, Miss Weston."

"I decided, upon receiving your letter, not to look up Mr. Godfrey, but now I am determined to do so."

"I have undertaken, through you, to find him, and I desire you to start out to track him down."

"When you have found him, when you know he will be where I can reach him at your call, I wish you to telegraph or write me."

"Do not let him suspect you, and do not, of course, arrest him, only find him and let me know."

"I may aid you in your search by telling you that a man was here yesterday, who is going directly to him."

"That might save a great deal of time, expense and search, Miss Weston; but you are certain now that I was not mistaken in having seen him in San Antonio, Texas?"

"I am sure that it was he."

"I make it a rule to keep my eyes on any case on which I am employed, though perhaps pursuing only one track, so, as I was out in Texas on a Government Secret Service trail, I came upon the gentleman whom I had tracked for you to find out his real character, and I knew that you believed him to be dead."

"I did, and I thank you."

"But this man who was here yesterday, Miss Weston?"

"Is his friend, after a fashion."

"He came here to do mischief, but changed his mind, and now goes back to his master, Gabriel Godfrey."

"He did not say where he was, further than that he was in the Southwest somewhere, and leading the life of a gambler, and what is known as a road-agent."

"When a little girl I passed several years upon a border ranch my father owned, and if he is what I then knew as road-agents, he certainly is a very wicked man."

"This man who goes back to him, remember, is not your game, nor are you to see what you may discover against him, through me, to his harm, for I am under a pledge not to betray him, and I shall extract from you a promise to this effect."

"Which I give willingly, Miss Weston."

"Thank you, sir; but you are to use him only to find Godfrey."

"I understand."

"His name is Redford Reynolds, and yet what he is known by I do not know."

"He is a well-formed, fine-looking man of thirty-three or four, with a full beard to his waist, and dark-brown hair, worn long."

"His eyes are dark, his complexion bronzed, and he dresses like a Western man, wearing also a broad-brimmed slouch hat."

"He came here on horseback, and met with an accident through his horse falling in a bridge with him, and he received a severe wound on the head."

"I had one of my servants see which way he went from here, and he rode down the river highway, so you can take one of my teams and follow, sending it back in a day or so, and going on as you deem best."

"What your expenses are to be I have no means of knowing, but I wish you to go well supplied for every emergency, so I have had you five checks made out, each for five hundred dollars, and they have been certified at the bank, so you will only have to indorse them to get the money, and here are a hundred dollars for immediate use."

"Now, Mr. Hume, you know what I expect of you, and I have arranged a secret code for you to telegraph me in, so that others may not understand it."

"Here it is, and you can study it at your leisure."

"If you need more money wire me to any amount in reason, and it is at your service, and you shall not complain of your pay for your work."

"Well, she is all business, beautiful and keen as a whip, and I'll find her man for her," was the remark of Homer Hume as he left the mansion upon his mission.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CAPTAIN CRUEL.

THE scene again changes to the far West, and the reader is introduced into a lonely camp in a mountain range, some fifty miles from the mining-camps of Last Chance.

The camp is situated in a canyon, in a fastness of a mountain range where one would think the foot of man never trod.

But there are a number of men there, scattered about around camp-fires, and seemingly content to idle the time away.

They are a wild-looking set, in picturesque border garb of buckskin leggings, top-boots, spurs, hunting-shirt and slouch hats.

The strangest of all is that even in camp they are masked.

The face of each man is concealed by a flesh-colored, close-fitting mask, which at a very short distance appears to be the face itself.

Some of these masks have beard upon them, to make them appear more life-like, and one seeing the maskers pass by at the distance of a few paces would never suspect that these faces were covered over.

The men were all heavily armed, with a couple of revolvers in their belts, a long knife, and by each man lay a short repeating carbine, with a strap attached to sling at the back.

Their saddles and bridles, of the Texas pattern, were also near, and each had a lariat hanging to the horn.

In saddles, bridles, weapons and the dress of the men there was a similarity that made all appear like a uniform, the only difference being in the marks and the size of the men, and in those there was not a great difference, for all were finely-formed specimens of manhood, whatever their moral character might be.

Not far from the two fires about which were gathered the men, lay a man asleep, his face shielded by his broad sombrero although he wore also a mask.

As he lay on a gayly-colored *serape* his form showed to perfection, and a splendid one it was, the limbs being shapely, the waist small and the shoulders broad.

He was dressed as were his men, only his hunting-shirt was of silk and his jacket of black velvets while his buckskin leggings were of the finest dressed skins.

His boots were fit for a major-general of cavalry, and a glance showed that the spurs were of massive gold.

His weapons were of the best, but he carried no carbine, and in his broad black slouch-hat was a pin with the number 12, and two letters D. D.

Down the canyon a number of horses were visible, and they were all jet-black, long-bodied and splendid animals.

Presently a sharp yelp was heard down the canyon, the horses pricked up their ears, and up toward the camp-fires came at a full run a large dog black as jet, and evidently a cross between a bloodhound and a Newfoundland.

The men sprung to their feet at sight of the animal, and all eyes were upon him as he rushed up to where lay the form of the man who was the leader of the horsemen.

He sprung to his feet at a growl of the dog, and said quickly:

"Well, Guard, what news?"

The dog wagged his tail while the man bent over and sliding back a spring in his collar took from a small receptacle there a slip of paper.

He read it aloud for the men to hear:

"A horseman in the distance coming this way."

"No one else visible."

There was no address, no signature, but all understood it, and without a word the horses were led up and saddled, while the dog messenger had gone back at a run to whoever had sent him.

One of the men saddled and bridled the superb black horse of the leader, and led him up to where he stood, and he mounted with the air of one who was a perfect horseman.

Without a word he rode down the canyon, and his men followed silently in single file.

The mask worn by the leader was really a piece of artistic work, for it was of wire, and seemed to fit every feature perfectly, while it extended back to where the hair hid its edges.

It ran under the chin to the neck, and a silk handkerchief covered it there.

There was a dark silken mustache upon it, that looked strangely natural, and the complexion painted upon it was bronzed to the hue of flesh.

A ride of a mile down the canyon brought the horsemen to a clump of trees, and among them stood a man by the side of his horse.

He was in the same attire as the others, wore a mask and rode a black horse.

Near him, lying upon the ground, was the huge dog that had brought the message up the canyon.

"Well, Six, what is it?" asked the leader as he halted near the man.

"Yonder horseman, sir; but he seems alone, though I knew not who might be following, so reported by the dog."

"You were right," and the leader turned a field-glass upon a horseman now about half a mile away.

"Ah! I know him, so you can return to camp, men," and the leader rode forward, while the men went back up the canyon, excepting the one who was standing on guard.

A few hundred yards from the outpost the leader halted and awaited the approach of the strange horseman.

He was well-mounted, dressed in buckskin even to moccasins, and wore a slouch hat.

A rifle was hanging at his back, and in his belt were two revolvers.

A led horse carried a large pack, and the man rode along like one who knew the country, having come across a wide plain that was only broken here and there by a clump of timber.

The man's face was covered by a long beard that fell to his waist, and he seemed tired, as did his horses, as though they had come a long journey.

"Ho, Wolf, you are back again, and sooner than I thought," called out the leader to the strange horseman, and he held out his hand as the other rode up and wearily threw himself from his saddle, leaving his horses to graze near by.

"Yes, back again, and from a useless trip."

"Hah! you did not succeed then?"

"No."

"Are you playing me false, man, for you know I am not one to be trifled with?" said the chief firmly.

"Nor am I, and I am not to be frightened by you, Sir Chief of the Devil's Dozen, because you have your men in yonder canyon at your back."

"Come, I do not wish to quarrel with you, Wolf, but I am fearfully disappointed at what you tell me," said the chief, as though to placate matters.

"I told you the truth for I went for nothing."

"But why?"

"You cannot get what is not there, captain."

"Yet why not there?"

"The lady is dead."

"Dead!"

With the word, the man who was sitting down upon the grass sprung to his feet and tore off his mask, as though it stifled him and he needed air.

He seemed not to mind the other seeing his face, and glared at him as though to force him to take back the words he had uttered.

"Dead! did you say she was dead?" he asked hoarsely.

"So I said, and so I mean."

"I cannot believe it."

"Do you mean that I lie?"

"No, for I cannot see any motive for that; but if there was, I would think so, for I am sure

no man tells the truth or does a good act when a lie will suffice or evil can be done."

"You judge all men by your own corrupt nature; but do you wish to hear my story?"

"Yes."

"Read this first, and convince yourself."

He took from a wallet a slip of paper, evidently cut from a newspaper, and the one to whom he handed it read aloud with lips that quivered and a face that was livid, as follows:

"Died, on the 17th inst., at her home at Roseland, Miss Myra Weston, in the twenty-second year of her age."

"My God! this is terrible, Wolf."

"One would think that you really loved her."

"Loved her! I idolized her."

"And yet gave her up."

"Bah! you do not understand fully."

"I was to have married her, as you well know, and you surely have not forgotten why I gave her up."

"No, but I supposed you intended to return and claim her, for she surely did not suspect you."

A cold sweat broke out upon the brow of the man, whose face looked like one in real torture, while Wolf wore an expression as though he really enjoyed the anguish of the other.

"Tell me of her," at last said the captain, and there was a tremor in his voice.

"Why, who could have thought that a woman's death could have hurt you, you who have been such a red-handed devil that men call you Captain Cruel?"

"We will not discuss what I am, nor what you are, for in a comparison of characters, mine would hardly be blacker than yours."

"But to your story, for I sent you on an errand that I believed would bring us both a large sum, and give us a chance to back out of the accursed lives we live and go elsewhere before the hangman gets his clutch upon us."

"Now to your story, Wolf, for I am all impatience to hear it," and while the man he addressed as Wolf remained half reclining upon the grass, Captain Cruel of the Devil's Dozen paced to and fro, too nervous to remain still while he listened to the story to be told him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WOLF'S SIGNAL.

"You told me, Captain Cruel," began the man, Wolf, in a slow, deliberate way, "that we could get a fortune, if I would go East and manage it."

"I concluded to go, as you dared not do so—"

"And you are also a fugitive."

"True, but I was a boy when I fled, and no one knows me now as I am."

"Besides, I was very particular not to go where there was a possibility of recognition."

"Still I went, and that as I said, you dared not do, or you would never have wished to share with me."

"It was because you thought a half loaf better than none, that you wanted to give me the other half."

"Stop your nonsense and tell me what you did."

"Well, I went to the place, and found that as the lady was dead, a short while before my arrival, there was nothing to be done but return."

"Still I wished to convince myself that there was nothing to gain, so I had my horse throw me near the place, and was taken in and cared for."

"I pretended to be very low, but managed to be up and about when none of the servants were with me, and I saw that all of value had been removed and the place left in charge only of a couple of domestics."

"So I came back here to report, and getting my horse, left at the station, put on my old border rig once more and here I am."

"Well, I suppose you have done all that there was to do; but I confess to you, Wolf, but for this death notice of Myra Weston, I would believe that you had gotten the jewels and money and were playing me false."

"Had I gotten the money and the jewels why return here to share them with you?"

"True, that is logic at least and you need not have done so."

"I am sorry I suspected you but had you been successful I believe you would have stolen them."

"They would have tempted me I admit; but what is stirring around here and on the trails since I left?"

"Nothing to interest you, though I have more plans on foot I may need your aid in helping me to carry out."

"As what, for instance?"

"Well, there is a kidnapping affair I can make money out of."

"A rich miner?"

"I have nothing to tell you yet, but if I need your aid will send for you, and may wish some of your reds."

"You have but to command me if there is gold to be made."

"I believe you— Hah! I saw a man's head yonder most surely, and none of my men are

out, except on the outposts on duty," and the chief pointed to a distant thicket.

"Yonder," said Wolf quietly.

"Oh, yes, don't be alarmed for that is all right."

"But I am not deceived, for I saw a man distinctly, so will send for my men."

"No, hold! it was only one of my men."

"Your men?"

"Yes."

"Are you not alone?"

"Am I a fool, Captain Cruel, as well as a wicked man?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I knew not what your temper would be, when I told you I had failed in my visit to the East, and as you get into killing moods at times, I cared not to have you vent your ill-temper upon me."

"So I went by my camps and just collected half a hundred fine fellows to come with me, and they completely surround your camp, so that if you had attacked me, in a fit of anger, why I could have given a signal that would have brought aid, and if killed, I would at least have been avenged—see here!"

In an instant he gave a wild, long, piercing whistle, and then over the distant rise, from behind timber and out of thickets, came dashing a number of horsemen, coming from a semicircle which showed that the Devil's Dozen had certainly been surrounded.

They were red-skins too, and well mounted.

"Wolf, you do not trust me," said Captain Cruel angrily, and he quickly resumed his mask.

"No more than you do me, captain," was the laughing response, and he added:

"No, we are both infamous rascals and bear watching."

"Now I shall go to my village to rest, and if you need me you can send for me, as you have men who know where to find me; but see, my braves have a prisoner yonder," and Wolf pointed to where a number of mounted warriors were coming toward them with a horseman in their midst.

"It is a white man," said Captain Cruel.

"Yes."

"Then that seals his fate."

"I am not so sure of that, for he may not deserve death."

"No white man finds my haunt and lives," was the sullen reply.

"Well, we shall soon know what and who he is, but he certainly has not the look of a trapper or scout."

"No, he is dressed in black; but, be he whom he may, he dies," and turning toward where his sentinel was seated on his horse, a quarter of a mile away, the Chief of the Devil's Dozen gave a loud call.

Instantly out of the timber shot the large dog, coming toward him like the wind.

Taking a slip of paper from his pocket, Captain Cruel wrote on it a line, and put it in the secret receptacle of the dog's collar.

"Go," he said, and the well-trained brute darted back toward the mounted sentinel.

"What did you write on there, Captain Cruel?"

"To send my men to me."

"Why?"

"I want them."

"You have a dozen, I believe?"

"Yes, so called, and I am the thirteenth."

"Yes, it is the Devil's Dozen, I remember," said Wolf, with a sneer.

But he added:

"What do you want with your men, may I ask?"

"To put an end to that man, whoever he may be, for you, excepting my band and your braves, are all who must know my secret haunts."

"That man may be harmless, and besides, he is my prisoner."

"Yours?"

"Yes, for my braves are bringing him in."

"Well, it matters not, if he has found his way to my camp he never goes back, that is certain."

Wolf made no reply, and soon after the Indians came up with their prisoner.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BONE OF CONTENTION.

CAPTAIN CRUEL uttered an angry imprecation as he realized that Wolf was not to be governed by him so easily as in the past, and watched the approach of the braves with their prisoner.

He also noted the fact that over two-score were in sight, and that the line extended in a semicircle from the ridge on each side of the canyon where his men were.

"Have you more men than I see, Wolf?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"I do not believe you."

"Did I not tell you I had you surrounded?"

"Yes, you said so."

"Well, you see only half the circle."

"And the others?"

"Are up in the mountain ridge around the canyon."

"So you say."

"So I mean."

"How many?"

"Half a hundred."

"I do not believe you."

"Why should I come with a few men when it was just as easy to get a large number?"

"You seldom go with many, unless on a raid."

"Well, I know there is as large a price on my head as on yours, and since the raid on the Last Chance mining-camps, I know the miners are on the alert, and I have heard the cavalry from the forts have been prowling about."

"Still I believe I see all of your men."

"I did not know that I would find you here, so why bring all my braves to this point?"

"I do not know why you are anxious to know my force, Captain Cruel, but I have enough men to protect me, I assure you, and I came to this vicinity at sunrise this morning, and before I came forward waited three hours for my braves to take position."

"Do you wish to get rid of me and step into my moccasins?"

"They are safer than are my boots."

"Perhaps, and no more enviable," was the response, and Wolf turned toward the half-dozen braves who now rode up with the prisoner.

The braves were well-mounted and of the Sioux tribe, while they were in full war-paint as though on the war-path.

There were just thirty in sight, as Captain Cruel counted them, and excepting those who had come up with the prisoner, the others remained at a distance, having halted, in a semicircle to await a further signal from their leader.

The prisoner was mounted on a raw-boned American horse, and rode an army saddle and bridle.

He had a roll of blankets behind his saddle, a well-filled pair of saddle-bags, and a haversack hung over his shoulder.

He was dressed in deep black, the garb of a Catholic priest, and clean shaven and somber-looking; he wore no weapons, or at least none were in sight.

He appeared not in the least alarmed at his captivity, and bowed with a smile to the two men as he rode up, while he said:

"It is pleasant to feel that I am not to be a victim of savage cruelty."

"Well, sir, who and what are you, and why are you here?" asked Captain Cruel, sternly, taking upon himself the part of questioner.

"I am what my garb indicates, sir, and which I should think you would recognize—a priest of the Catholic Church," was the reply.

"Wolves are often found in sheep's clothing, sir, and you may or may not be a priest."

"And villains are often found under masks, sir," was the calm retort, and the piercing eyes of the priest were fixed upon the masked face of Captain Cruel.

"What! do you insult me?"

"By Heaven, but I shall—"

"Hold! Raise not your hand to this man, chief, or I will see to it that you are the sufferer," cried Wolf, sternly, and he sprung to his feet.

Captain Cruel turned upon him in a rage, and said savagely:

"Hail do you dare me?"

"I do, and I warn you too."

"Ho, Devils! this way and quickly too!"

The voice of the outlaw leader rung like a trumpet, and out of the motte where the sentinel stood, came a dozen men at a canter.

"Chief, do you wish to try conclusions with me, that you bring your men here?"

"Remember, I have three-score braves with-in call, and you have no right to this prisoner, for my warriors brought him here, so leave him to them."

"Yes, if you would but leave him to them; but will you?"

"I shall decide what to do—but see, my braves are narrowing the circle, so halt your men where they are, or begin the trouble, as you deem best."

"You see that you are half a dozen to one against me, and I would be a dead man before my men came up, so I must give you your way."

"You are wise, especially with my own prisoner," was the sneering reply.

The prisoner meanwhile had sat upon his horse unmoved, and yet his keen eyes seemed to watch every move and take in the situation correctly.

As Captain Cruel with a signal halted his men, Wolf turned to the prisoner and asked politely:

"Who are you, father?"

"I am Father Romer, a missionary priest, seeking to convert the Indians, my son, and I was going to the village of White Wolf when these braves surrounded me and made me a prisoner."

"Father Romer, I am White Wolf, the Red Renegade, as men call me, and justly so."

"I am, or was a Catholic in my younger years, and I welcome you among my red-skin people, and you are safe."

"I am not so sure of that," put in Captain Cruel.

Without noticing the remark, Wolf continued:

"How was it that you came here, father, and alone?"

"I came not alone, for I had two guides, who brought me thus far and directed me on to your village, fearing to go further themselves, as your red-skins are at war with the whites, I am told."

"Yes, we are at war with the pale-faces; but you are a brave man to intrust yourself among wild Sioux, father."

"I am but doing my duty, and I hope to have good come of it."

"I had heard of you, my son, as a renegade, a monster, and all that was evil, and I am glad to know that your heart is not wholly wicked, and with your help I hope to be a teacher among your people, and may Heaven lead you back, my son."

The renegade bit his lips nervously at the words of Father Romer, while Captain Cruel laughed wickedly and said:

"The hangman will lead him to the gallows some day; but come, Wolf, do you expect to let this man live among your people?"

"I do."

"By Heaven, it shall not be, for I will kill him as I would a dog, for his priestly garb shall not save him," and, as he spoke, Captain Cruel whipped out a revolver.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FATHER ROMER.

"CAPTAIN CRUEL, dare to level that weapon at the heart of that holy man, and you die on the instant!"

So stern, so threatening were the words of White Wolf, the renegade, that even Captain Cruel, daring, reckless devil that he was, hesitated in his intention of sending a bullet through the heart of the priest.

"What! do you protect him, after he has found the way to my secret retreat?"

"Found the way to your retreat?"

"Why, did you not hear him say he sought my village, up in the mountains, and was guided here by two men, who left him, afraid to come further?"

"Where are you from, sir?" asked Captain Cruel.

"The mining-camps of Gold Glen last."

"What were you doing there?"

"Trying to do good, but I was ordered by my superior to go into the Indian villages and seek converts."

"And you picked out a tribe that is at war with the whites and governed by this man, known to be a renegade, and merciless as a red-skin?"

"The most wicked, my son, require the most teaching and prayer."

"And what do you expect to gain by your coming?"

"Souls."

"Well, you will lose your scalp within the month, in spite of your cross and prayers."

"Men have died for their duty before, my son, and I am alone in the world, with no one to care for me, or miss me."

"Well, as it will cause a split between Wolf here and myself, for me to kill you, I suppose I must be merciful and spare you, so you are in his hands, and I wash mine of you, but beware not to cross my path or to come to my camp with your prayer and psalm-singing, for I don't wish my men turned into a Salvation Army," and Captain Cruel laughed wickedly.

"I do not court death, my son, so will heed your warning; but, as this man whom men call a monster permits me to go to his people, let me tell you that should death overtake you or your men, and dying, you need a word of comfort from a priest, send for me, and I will come to you."

"You are very kind; but I shall not require your services, for I shall die as I have lived, without fear or the prayers of the church; but success to you in your gigantic work of teaching red-skins how to forgive their enemies, pray for those who follow their trail, and to give up scalp-taking as a business," and again the chief laughed in his rude way, while the priest said, humbly:

"I will do my duty, my son, and may Heaven have mercy upon you."

The voice was deep and impressive, and the words checked the laughter on the lips of Captain Cruel, who, in spite of his nerve, shuddered.

Then he turned to White Wolf and said:

"Well, what is to be done now?"

"I shall go to my village."

"Subject to a call if I need you?"

"For what?"

"I have not given up the camps of Last Chance yet."

"You really think there is much to be gained then?"

"I know it."

"What news have you?"

"I have been there."

"You?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Not long ago, and I tell you we can make

our fortunes in the raid; but first I have another plan to carry out."

"And that is?"

"The kidnapping scheme I spoke of."

"Ah, yes, and that will pan out rich."

"Immense so, and when we get the gold for ransom, we can strike the camps, and you must hold your horses in hand so as to come at a moment's call when needed."

"You may depend upon me."

"Ah, yes, when gold is the basis of your action; but I won't quarrel with you, so will say good-by, and some day I may come up to join you all in your devotions, for I have no doubt but that Father Romer will have your village turned into a pious picnic, and the warriors will bury their tomahawks, and turn their scalp-knives into shears for hair-cutting instead of hair-raising."

"Farewell, Father Romer, and let me give you a pointer that White Wolf's Bible is known by the spots, kings and queens upon the pages. But what a picture! The devil and a priest as pards!" And springing upon his horse, the chief of the Devil's Dozen rode away toward his men.

Immediately after, White Wolf, riding alongside of the priest, said quietly:

"Come, father, evil as I am, you are welcome to my village, and you will not even find red-skins as black-hearted as is yonder man."

"And that is the one whom men call Captain Cruel, my son?"

"Yes, father."

"Chief of the outlaw band of road-agents known as the Devil's Dozen?"

"The same."

"He has a fearful name and appalling crimes to answer for, if the half that is said of him is true."

"His deeds of evil are exaggerated, as are mine, father; but neither of us are saints," was the bitter reply.

"He appears to be a splendid-looking man, though his mask hid his face completely."

"He is a splendid devil, and as handsome as a picture."

"You have seen his face, then?"

"Yes, father, I have known him from boyhood."

"I had heard that none of the Devil's Dozen ever saw the faces of each other."

"So it is said, and I am sure not one has ever seen his chief's; but I have, for as I said, I have known the man from boyhood."

"And what could have made so splendid a man what he is?"

"An evil heart and bad nature to begin with, father; but I have gone to the bad, too, and I do not believe I was wicked at heart until my hopes and ambitions were crushed."

"You have a heart still, my son, while that man has not."

"He is as wicked as sin itself, and merciless as a red-skin in his wild nature, I should judge."

The two were riding side by side, the chief directing the way, and a silence fell upon the two.

Behind, in Indian file, came the red-skins, and as they appeared over the ridge, coming from the mountain in two lines, it could be seen that the White Wolf had told the truth about his having the canyon of the Devil's Dozen surrounded.

There were fully half a hundred horses, and although Captain Cruel's men were picked, and desperate fighters, he could never have withstood a combat with the White Wolf and his band of mounted warriors.

For some time the line rode on in silence, and the stragglers having fallen into line, it looked like a huge serpent crawling around the base of the mountains.

Suddenly a red-skin brave nearest his chief, uttered a word in his native tongue.

White Wolf glanced back and said:

"I will halt, for Captain Cruel has sent one of his men after me."

As he spoke a horseman appeared in sight, coming on at a sweeping gallop.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MESSENGER.

WHEN Captain Cruel joined his men, they knew that something had gone wrong with him.

Without a word he placed himself at their head and rode back toward his secret retreat in the canyon.

As he went along he saw the red-skin warriors filing out of the mountain shadows on either side, and falling into the line behind their chief.

"He was right, for he had the men, and I would have made a mistake to attack him," he muttered.

"But, somehow, I doubt that priest, though he may be the fool he says he is to come here among the Indians and attempt to convert them."

Again he moved on, to suddenly halt as he reached the entrance to the canyon.

He remained undecided, as though weighing something in his mind, and then said aloud:

"Men, I have work to do down among the camps, and I wish my whole force, and more,

too, so I'll send after White Wolf and ask the loan of a score of his braves."

Then he glanced down the line and called out:

"Number Three."

"Yes, captain," and one of the horsemen, the third in the line, rode up to him.

"Go after White Wolf and tell him I would like him to let me have twenty of his braves for a week or two, perhaps longer."

"Yes, captain."

"I was going to ask him to go with his men, but it is best that they should be under my command without their chief."

"And, Three, tell him to send one who speaks English, for I am not as fluent in Sioux as I would wish to be."

"Yes, chief."

"And bring them back with you—go!"

The masked outlaw wheeled his horse out of line and rode away at a canter, while Captain Cruel rode on, followed by his men.

White Wolf had already gotten several miles upon his way, and before the outlaw overtook him he was quite a long way from the point where he had parted with Captain Cruel.

But seeing the horseman coming after him, when it had been reported along the Indian line that there was a horseman in pursuit, he halted and waited for him to come up with him.

The man rode at a canter, sat on his horse well, and his face was concealed by a mask that hid every feature.

He drew rein a few feet from White Wolf, and as he delivered his message his eyes fell upon the priest.

He looked fixedly at him, and Father Romer caught his eye through the holes in the mask.

"Why does your chief want my braves?" asked White Wolf when the messenger had told his errand.

"As a support, I judge, sir, for his own men, from what he said."

"Twenty?"

"So he said, sir."

"For how long?"

"A week or more."

"When?"

"He asked me to request that they return with me, sir."

"Well, I shall have to let him have them, I suppose, though I did wish to keep all my braves about the village for awhile."

"And he asked me to request one who speaks English."

"Captain Cruel speaks the Sioux tongue."

"Not very well, sir."

"Very well, I will send him Chief Blue Eyes and fourteen men, for they are all I can spare."

"You know best, chief," answered the messenger, and all the time during his conversation with White Wolf he was eying the priest.

White Wolf then called to a chief who advanced, and addressing him in the Sioux tongue told him to call fourteen of his best braves and return with the messenger.

"Does he speak English, sir," asked the outlaw.

"Answer him, Blue Eyes," and White Wolf turned to the chief, who, though an Indian, was strangely marked by having blue eyes.

"Yes, me talk pale-face tongue," was the answer of the red-skin.

"All right, that settles it," and turning to the priest, the messenger continued:

"I am an outlaw it is true, father, but I ask your blessing."

The priest responded promptly:

"I do bless you, my son, but not your unlawful and criminal deeds."

"Repent and leave off your evil career, for there was hope even for the thief on the cross."

The outlaw bowed low, saluted the White Wolf and rode away, followed by Blue Eyes and his fourteen braves, who filed silently behind him, seemingly indifferent as to which way they went or the work before them.

And again the White Wolf and his band moved on, but, halting when out of sight of the messenger, he called to an Indian back in the line:

"Winged Foot, take two warriors with you and dog the trail of Captain Cruel and his party."

"If you can see Blue Eyes to speak with him, tell him you are on the trail for me, and send me word back just what the Red Chief intends to do with my braves."

The White Wolf spoke in the Sioux tongue, and the Indian called to two warriors and without a word rode slowly back on the trail, while the others continued once more on their way.

In the mean time the messenger, followed by Blue Eyes and his braves, passed rapidly on the way toward the canyon.

He rode at a pace that the red-skins could see no reason for, yet they never asked why he did so, but kept well up in the rear.

The sentinel, with the dog lying near him, was passed at the entrance to the canyon, and the echoes sounded like a thousand hoofs, as the messenger and his followers darted up toward the outlaw camp.

The Devil's Dozen were on the alert.

They were not to be surprised, and that there might be enemies who had killed the outpost and rushed upon their camp they knew was possible, though not probable.

So, when the messenger turned a bend in the canyon he saw before him a barrier of horse-flesh extending across, just behind a ridge of rocks, and a fallen tree, and behind this wall of steeds stood the outlaws, a carbine muzzle pointing over the saddle of each animal.

He drew rein at once.

He felt that, in his haste he had perhaps made a mistake, and the red-skins who followed him were glad too to come to a slow pace.

That was a deadly-looking barrier to charge in their front, and had they been on a hostile errand they would have wanted many more of their comrades with them ere they faced it.

"What means this, Number Three?"

The voice of the chief rung out sternly and in anger, as he beheld the messenger, and behind him Blue Eyes the Sioux chief, and his fourteen warriors.

Again did the messenger realize his mistake, and he knew that it was the coolness of the chief alone that had prevented his being fired upon.

The clatter of the hoofs of sixteen horses, echoing against the sides of the rocky canyon, had sounded like an army, and the outlaws had looked only for a foe.

All breathed more freely when there was to be no battle to the death.

Number Three, for Captain Cruel called not a man of his band by name, rode at once up to his chief and said, quickly:

"I beg pardon, captain, but I have news for you, and in my haste to tell you, I never once thought of the surprise it would give you, sir."

"It was a surprise, sir, but we were ready to greet friend or foe."

"Another time be more careful, for had I not recognized you on the instant you would have been a dead man and half of White Wolf's braves would have gone down too, and the Sioux, instead of remaining our friends, would have become our bitterest foes, for you cannot explain an accident to a red-skin."

"Be more careful next time, Number Three."

"I will, chief, and I regret my foolishness."

"All right, Number Three."

"Men, you are dismissed," and the chief turned to his band, and the outlaws at once went back to their camps, while he added:

"Take these horses with you, and lead Blue Eyes to my quarters, Number One."

The man saluted and obeyed, and Captain Cruel again turned to the messenger and said:

"Now, what news bring you, Number Three?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FATHER ROMER.

CAPTAIN CRUEL was no ordinary personage, and his men feared him as though he were really the Devil himself.

He had picked his men in the various mining-camps, and knew just what they were, and he had selected each one of them when in disguise himself, so that not a man among them had ever seen his face.

He had organized his lawless band under iron-clad rules, and he called them a Devil's Dozen, himself making Thirteen; but yet there was one thing the miners could not understand, and that was when one of the band was killed there was always another to promptly take his place.

The truth was Captain Cruel had a relay of men in his secret retreat.

He always went with his dozen, and had others in the camp to step into the shoes of any man who was killed, wounded or captured.

But the laws of the band were that no man was to be taken alive.

If he saw there was no chance to escape, he was compelled by his oath to commit suicide.

Other than that one day a member of the band said in anger that the chief should be called Captain Cruel, and he at once had adopted the name and then shot the one who suggested it, the men knew nothing of him.

He was, or had been a soldier, they thought, and he was desperate in his daring, while he seemed to bear a charmed life, for many a time had it seemed to his men that there was no escape for him.

He rode magnificently, was a dead shot, and seemed not to know what fear was.

He haunted the gold trails, and struck the Overland coaches, but always far apart, so that he was never known where to be found.

While miners dreaded the hostile Sioux, and would not have ventured into their country without a large force, Captain Cruel and his dozen would dash right on toward the village and fastnesses of the Indians if he was pursued, and even the soldiers from the forts dared not follow him, unless in large force, and then it was invariably the Indians whom they found, while the Devil's Dozen would next be heard of over near the fort attacking an Overland coach.

For months Captain Cruel had been on the trails as a terror, and he was daily becoming more feared, until a reward had been offered by the miners and Overland stage companies for his capture.

It was known also that a renegade white man

was the chief of the Sioux, but no one knew that he was the ally of Captain Cruel.

Such was the man at the head of the Devil's Dozen, and to whom the messenger, Number Three, had a story to tell.

"Well, Number Three, what is it?" asked Captain Cruel, when left alone with the messenger.

"Did you see the man the red-skins captured this morning?"

"I did."

"He was a priest."

"So he said."

"Do you know his name, sir?"

"He called himself Father Romer."

"Where was he taken, sir?"

"He was captured by White Wolf's braves, and was on his way to seek his village that he might convert the Indians," and the chief laughed.

"Captain Cruel, that man is no priest."

"What?"

"He is no priest, sir."

"Do you know this, Number Three?"

"Yes, sir."

"You saw him?"

"As I see you now, sir."

"Well?"

"I recognized him."

"You have seen him before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is he?"

"A detective!"

The chief started, and said sternly:

"Come, let me hear what you have to say."

"Well, sir, I felt when I saw the man that I had met him before, and all the while I was talking to White Wolf I was trying to recall just where and when."

"At last it flashed upon me, and to be sure, I asked him to give me his blessing, that I might hear his voice."

"This he did, and I was certain."

"And he is a detective?"

"He is."

"What was his name?"

"Homer Hume."

"Well, where did you see him before to-day?"

"I was a bank cashier, sir, and I could never tell the difference between my own and the bank's money, so was wont to get behind in my accounts."

"One day, in squaring up the cash, I found I was short a couple of thousands, so I took as much more to speculate on, and lost that, too."

"Thinking that luck must turn, I kept it up until I was behind my game with the bank just thirty thousands."

"Well, sir, just as I was thinking of lending myself quite a snug sum of the bank's money and going on a trip for my health, accident showed me that the assistant cashier was playing the same game that I was."

"I got a chance to go over his accounts, and discovered that he was a small winner in comparison to myself, for he was out only a few thousands."

"So I went to the president with tears in my eyes, and reported him."

"The president ordered me to get out a warrant for his arrest, and a meeting of the bank directors was called."

"I wrote a note to the assistant cashier, whom I had sent to a neighboring town on an errand, to make some bank collections amounting to a thousand dollars, telling him all was discovered, and to fly."

"The note was anonymous, and he took my advice and skipped."

"Of course the cash I had stolen was missed, and all was put down to the assistant cashier."

"The bank was not hurt at all, and I was complimented for my discovery."

"But after getting out of danger the assistant got over his scare."

"He had left a family and a little home, and he wrote to the president confidentially, turning over his property to him, which he said would more than cover what he had taken, and he gave a correct list of every dollar taken, and sent back two-thirds of what he had carried with him from his collections the day I gave him the warning to fly."

"The president was a shrewd man, and he kept his own counsel."

"The more he pondered over the letter of the missing man, he saw truth in every word of it, and he felt that only one leak had been found, and not the large one."

"So he went up to a Detective Agency in the city and asked for their best man."

"Mr. Homer Hume was assigned to him, and the two had a long talk together."

"The next day Mr. Hume took the trail, and I made an acquaintance."

"He was one of the best of fellows, and threw it into my way to make money by speculations."

"Several times he paid me large earnings on money I advanced to him, and I was prospering."

"One day he suggested a large speculation, and told me he needed ten thousand."

"I told him I could not raise it."

"He always appeared to be a rich man, and so he said:

"This is a dead sure thing, and I am going in for twenty thousand, and wish you to get your third also, for I must put in thirty thousand in cash, and you can make a clean five thousand within the week."

"I still hesitated, and he said:

"I am so sure of it, I am willing to give you my ten-day note of hand for the ten thousand you put in."

"I saw his large sum in his hands, and so I felt sure he was a very rich man, and I yielded."

"I borrowed the ten thousand from the bank without speaking to any one about it, and simply by a scratch of the pen, and I invested it with my friend Hume."

"The day after the president waltzed into the bank with an expert, the directors were sent for, and there was a going over of all the books, collaterals and cash, and I was pinned to the wall."

"Just then Mr. Hume walked in smiling sweetly, and said:

"My speculation is O. K., and yours panned out iron instead of gold."

"The iron he referred to were handcuffs, and I was escorted to jail with high honors."

"Well, chief, I was tried, convicted, sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, and there was an accident on the train that I was on, when going to the prison."

"I escaped, for my guard was killed, and an old gent near me was too badly hurt to need a wallet full of bank-notes I had seen him fondling so I took it and left him my blessing."

"I was ironed to my guard, but his wrist was broken, and with his knife I cut off his hand and freed myself."

"As the climate East was not suited to my constitution, I came West, and you know what I am now?"

"Yes, a most consummate villain by your own confession; but this priest?" said the chief, who had listened most attentively to the story told by Number Three.

"Is my dear friend, Homer Hume."

"You are sure?"

"Certain."

"Has he gone into the priesthood since?"

"Oh, no, he is anything that his business calls for, you may be sure."

"What is he out here for?"

"For you, perhaps, or me, or the White Wolf."

"I see, and the best thing to be done then is to go at once after the White Wolf and denounce the man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then mount a fresh horse and accompany me, Number Three, and we will take Blue Eyes as an escort with half of his braves."

Half an hour after Captain Cruel, Number Three and the Blue Eyes with half a dozen braves, were on the trail of the White Wolf.

CHAPTER XL.

DENOUNCED.

FATHER ROMER, owing to the fact that the White Wolf had once been a Catholic, and had naturally a good heart, in spite of his having been driven to become a renegade to his own people, found himself well cared for upon his arrival in the Indian village.

The village was well situated upon a ridge, with good pasture land and running streams in the valley beyond, and heavy timbers to break the north winds from the camps.

There were some fifteen hundred red-skin citizens under the command of White Wolf, and they regarded him almost as a superior being.

He had not been so very long their chief, but he had served them well the while.

He had saved the life of the former head chief, and had prevented the village from being surprised by a squadron of cavalry, and so had won the hearts of the people.

When the head chief died of fever some time after, he had become the ruler in his stead.

He lived in a grand tepee, had all the comforts about him which could be had in that wild land, and was really a good leader for the Indians, outside of his raids to get money and plunder.

A large tepee near his own was given to Father Romer, upon the return to camp, and then the White Wolf distributed the gifts he had brought his people, for he had been absent for some time.

The priest made himself perfectly at home, and the White Wolf found him a very companionable person, as the two sat talking together that night in the tepee of the chief.

White Wolf had explained to his people that the priest was a mighty medicine-man, who held his power from the Great Spirit, and would teach them all the way to reach the happy hunting-grounds, and the red-skins seemed to be pleased with the idea, especially the squaws.

Father Romer retired late, and slept soundly; but by midnight Chief White Wolf was awakened by visitors.

Blue Eyes, Captain Cruel and Number Three had arrived in the village and made a call upon him.

He gave them audience at once, and seemed surprised to see the outlaw chief.

"Well, Captain Cruel, how can I serve you?" he asked.

"I will tell you, Wolf, and if you had allowed me to do as I wished this morning, send a bullet through the heart of that fellow who calls himself a priest, I would have been saved this long ride."

"What is the matter now, captain?"

"The man is an impostor."

"What proof have you?"

"My man here, Number Three."

"And what proof can you give, Number Three?"

"Will you hear my story, sir?"

"Certainly."

"Did the priest speak of me after I parted with him this morning?"

"Not more than to say that your voice had a familiar sound, and that he must have met you before."

"He was right, we have met before."

"I noticed you looking sharply at him."

"Yes, and did you notice I asked him for his blessing?"

"I did."

"It was to hear his voice, which had a familiar sound to my ear."

"And you say he is an impostor?"

"As a priest, yes."

"What is he?"

"The best detective in the East, and that is saying a good deal."

"I cannot believe it."

"It is true."

"Tell your story, Number Three, and convince the White Wolf," said Captain Cruel, with his usual sneer.

This Number Three did do, giving the outline of what he had told Captain Cruel of his past life, and the very clever capture of him by Homer Hume the detective.

White Wolf listened with the deepest interest, and then said slowly and thoughtfully:

"Now I recall it, I too recall his voice, which is a remarkable one."

"On my way West a man took a seat by my side on the train and entered into conversation."

"He had spectacles and white hair, but a smooth-shaven face, and somehow I seem to feel that it was this man, if Father Romer is really the one you say he is."

"But in the morning we shall know."

"Where is he now?"

"In the tepee I have given him ten rods distant."

"Will he not see us, suspect something and escape?"

"He cannot escape from here," was the reply, and White Wolf bade his guests turn in for a rest, and in the morning he would investigate the case of Father Romer.

"If he is an impostor, then he dies," said Captain Cruel, threateningly.

"If he is, but I must be sure first that he is not what he says he is, for, though appearances are against him he may be innocent."

"No, that is my man, Homer Hume," said Number Three, with confidence.

Soon after sunrise the next morning White Wolf went to the tepee of Father Romer.

He did not wish his people to suspect the priest, should he really not be a detective in disguise, knowing that they would be suspicious of him and his influence would be gone.

So he had told Blue Eyes to say nothing of the reason for the coming of Captain Cruel, and going to the tepee he called out pleasantly:

"Good-morning, Father Romer."

"Good-morning, my son," was the reply, and the supposed detective was already up and dressed.

"Come to my tepee with me, father."

Without a word Father Romer followed, and the next instant was ushered into the large tepee of White Wolf, where he was confronted by Captain Cruel and Number Three.

He did not change color, or start, but said pleasantly:

"Good-morning, gentlemen, I had not expected the chief had guests."

"Yes, father, Captain Cruel and one of his men, known as Number Three, arrived last night, and they make a charge against you which I hope you will be able to prove yourself guiltless of, for, if guilty, I must frankly tell you no power on earth can save you from death."

"May I ask, my son, what is the charge?" was the cool inquiry, and both Captain Cruel and Number Three noticed that the priest did not change color in the slightest degree at the words of White Wolf.

"The charge is, sir, that I denounce you as Homer Hume, the detective," said Number Three, quickly, and every eye was upon the man he addressed to note his fear and surprise if guilty.

"My son, your denouncing me as some one whom you may think I resemble is no proof that I am he."

The words were calmly uttered, and even Captain Cruel could not but think from the manner of the accused that Number Three had made a mistake.

"Now, sir, do you deny that you are Homer

Hume, the detective, when I face you, for see, do you not know me?"

As Number Three spoke he removed his mask suddenly, and his face was revealed to the accused, and to the White Wolf also for the first time.

It was a strongly-marked face, yet cunning and sinister, and that of a man about forty years of age.

The accused man did not still show emotion, but gazing intently into the face turned upon him, said slowly:

"Yes, I have a knack of remembering faces, especially those that strike me, and I recall yours."

"And you deny that you are Detective Hume?"

"Certainly, I deny it, and I pity you, my son."

"Who am I?"

"You are Scott Gibbons, the defaulting cashier of the State Bank of—"

"Ha! and how do you know me, if you are not Detective Hume?"

"Because I have often deposited money with you for our Order of Christian Brothers, of which I was treasurer, when you were cashier at the State Bank."

"You remember Brother Doretheus most frequently brought the money to deposit, and also Brother Herman and myself."

"Yes, I remember you, Mr. Gibbons, and with what sincere regret I heard of your downfall."

"Is it true, Number Three, that the Christian Brother's Order he speaks of had an account in your bank?" asked Captain Cruel.

"It is."

"And did different members of the Order deposit money to the account?"

"They did, sir."

"Then it was there that you saw Father Romer, sir, and a resemblance to Detective Hume caused you to mistake him for him," sternly said the White Wolf.

"I know Detective Hume also, sir, and now that you mistake me for him, I know that there is a resemblance between us," the priest said blandly.

"Well, Number Three, you are mistaken, and I am very sorry that you are, I admit, for I suppose White Wolf will not let us kill this man on suspicion?"

"I certainly will not, Captain Cruel, but as there is a suspicion upon Father Romer, I must ask him to write a letter to his Order that I may send it to the nearest station to mail, and upon the reply his fate depends," said White Wolf.

"I will be glad to write the letter, my son," was the calm reply and with an oath Captain Cruel left the tepee, followed by Number Three, who said aloud:

"I will stake my life on it that that man is Homer Hume the detective, in spite of his securing proof of his innocence."

"We must kill him on the sly, so as to make sure that he does no mischief, if he really is the detective," Captain Cruel whispered to Number Three in response.

CHAPTER XLII.

MYRA WESTON RECEIVES A LETTER.

DETECTIVE HOMER HUME had been gone on his mission for Myra Weston, some two months, and she had from time to time received from him only a few lines, telling her how he prospered in his trailing a man across the continent.

One note had come from St. Louis, and it had simply stated:

"Am on the track of my man."

"Another was dated from Chicago, and read:

"My man leaves here in three days for Omaha, and I will be on the train with him."

Then came another note from Omaha, and its contents were:

"My man goes by horseback from here, and as near as I can discover his destination is the Colorado gold-mines."

"I shall follow him, for I have secured the best of guides and a complete outfit for the journey."

Then came a line from a mining-camp and it read:

"My man goes alone into the mountains toward the country of the hostile Sioux, known to be under a white renegade chief; but my guides will take me as far as they dare go, and after that I will depend upon myself to help me out."

This letter made Myra Weston most anxious about her agent, and she waited impatiently for another, with the dread that the daring man would venture too far and lose his life.

One day Myra received a letter from the city addressed in an unknown hand.

She broke open the envelope and saw another one within, sealed and addressed to her.

This she opened and read, and it was a surprise to her, for one side of the page the writing was boldly written, and the contents were not in accord with the other side, which was written in a small hand, and in pale ink.

She read the bold handwriting first.

It was addressed to Brother Anselmo, and was as follows:

"DEAR BROTHER:—

"After leaving the Brotherhood, I was sent as a missionary to the frontier, and I have been devoting my time to the saving of the souls of the wicked and unhappy men with whom I come in hourly contact in this wild land."

"But my bishop asked for a volunteer missionary priest, to go among the wild Indian tribes and seek converts, and I offered for the service, and upon the very threshold have gotten my life in peril, not from the savages however, but from our own people."

"To explain: A likeness, I hear, to a noted detective of your city, Homer Hume, has put me under the ban of death, unless I prove that I am not he, for lawless men here seek to kill me unless I show that I am a priest of the Church."

"I therefore beg of you to write immediately to me, to the address given below, and vouch that I am the priest, Father Romer, while also seek the office of the Secret Service chief, and have him give you a letter stating where the man Homer Hume now is."

"Do this for me promptly, Brother Anselmo, and save the life of yours fraternally."

"ROMER."

"Late Brother Romer of the Christian Order of Brothers."

Then followed the address, to a frontier station, and the surprised Myra turned to the other writing, which was indistinct but legible.

It was as follows:

"VILLAGE OF RENEGADE CHIEF,"

"WHITE WOLF."

June 1, 18—.

"Let me begin my letter to Miss Weston by explaining that the letter on the other page is but a *thin*, written under pressure of death."

"I followed my man to the border, as stated in my last from Denver, and from thence, with two guides, pursued his trail up into the wilds where I now am."

"My guides would go no nearer to the Indian village than thirty miles, and so I went on the trail alone."

"I found that it doubled, and my inexperience lost it, so that I was in a quandary when suddenly surrounded by mounted red-skins."

"I should state that I had taken the character of a priest, which I could well fill, having studied for the priesthood, and long been an altar boy."

"The Indians carried me to their chief, whom I found to be White Wolf, the Renegade, and in truth the very man I had been trailing."

"He had also changed his attire and come out in frontier garb."

"This man, White Wolf, the Renegade, was in council with Captain Cruel, the leader of the band of outlaws out here known as the Devil's Dozen."

"He had gone to meet Captain Cruel, to report the result of his errand to the East, and I need hardly tell you that this outlaw chief is none other than Gabriel Godfrey."

"He, Captain Cruel, and his men are always masked, but I saw enough to convince me that the chief of the Devil's Dozen is none other than Gabriel Godfrey."

"He wished to at once kill me, and was only prevented from doing so by the man Reynolds—White Wolf."

"At last he gave up the idea and I went with White Wolf to his village, but a messenger came after who happened to be an escaped convict that I run down several years ago and who recognized me."

"He went back and reported to his chief and then came to White Wolf's village to kill me."

"But I still played priest, and White Wolf remained my friend but told me I must prove by letter to my brotherhood that I was not a detective."

"I therefore wrote the letter in my tepee, which is on the other sheets of this paper, and at the same time, with *invisible ink*, which only becomes legible after forty-eight to sixty hours, wrote this letter to you."

"I addressed it to Brother Anselmo, but put it within an envelope that seemed to have no address, but it was addressed to you, as you see, and on it the words:

"My life hangs on the delivery of this letter to the party whose name is hereon—send at once."

"I knew that Brother Anselmo would do this, and you receive it all right."

"It is my desire to have you answer the letter, as from Brother Anselmo, stating that I am what I seem, and mailing it from the city where the order dwells."

"Please write it in a masculine hand, and mail at *earliest convenience*, for until it arrives, I will be a prisoner in White Wolf's village."

"I will meanwhile find out all I can about Gabriel Godfrey, and when at liberty I shall telegraph you, while, should you care to address me, do so to care of Ross Sampson, Last Chance Mining Camp, Colorado."

"Hoping I have made myself explicit, believe me with respect,

HOMER HUME."

"P. S. I should say that here I am known as Father Romer, so if I should not reappear you will know what my fate has been."

"Fortunately I had this invisible ink with me, or I fear my days would have been few."

H. H."

Twice did Myra Weston read this letter, and then she said earnestly:

"The brave, noble man."

"He shall not suffer a minute longer than is absolutely necessary."

"No, he must be released at once, and as the East is too far away I will go at once to the border—yes, and I will write him so with the secret code I gave him and send it in the letter from the pretended Brother Anselmo."

CHAPTER XLIII.

DANDY THE OVERLAND DRIVER.

SOME frontier artist, with considerable skill, and great pride in the Overland stage-coach that made a semi-monthly run into, and out of Last Chance, had painted upon the door of the

large, roomy and really fine vehicle a pair of golden wings, spread, and beneath the letters:

"THE GOLD WINGED CHARIOT."

One who saw this "Winged Chariot" on its run into Last Chance, and its start from the door of the Hash House, would have thought the name in part was deserved, for the horses fairly flew.

But once out of sight on the trail, and, as a miner remarked, the name of the "Creeping Hears" would be by far more appropriate.

But this was not the fault of Driver Rainbolt, who had been nicknamed the Driver Dandy, and half the time was called simply "Dandy."

He would have made twelve miles an hour along the whole trail, but for the orders of the company to "go slow and spare the cattle, to whip up for a run when the road-agents appeared."

Dandy well deserved his name for he was what to day would be called a Driver Dude.

He was the pink of neatness and style, dressed as flashy as a Mississippi River sport in the gala days of steamboating, and perfumed his hair and beard with scented oil, while he carried a red silk handkerchief that had the scent of sweet violets upon it to a remarkable degree.

Dandy also sported a diamond pin, a ring with a stage-whip cut into the stone, and a watch with a chain long enough, and massive enough to lynch him with.

He wore gauntlet gloves, had a gold-handled whip and looped his broad sombrero up on one side with a pin representing a wheel with wings on it.

Then he always dressed in white corduroy pants stuck in well polished boots with red tops and gold tassels, a blue velvet short coat, left open, as though to have his revolvers handy, when needed.

This gorgeous driver of the Last Chance Trail was smoking a cigar after his breakfast, as he waited to mount the box of the incoming coach and drive it on to Last Chance.

Suddenly it came in sight, and of course with a rush, and Luke Goulding drew up at the station door in a way that showed off his style and pitched the back seat passengers into the arms of the front seat.

"There's the Dandy now, miss," said Luke, and he addressed a lady who sat upon the box with him, seemingly preferring that seat to one inside.

She had a slender, graceful form, but had drawn a thick veil over her face as she neared the station.

"Yes, Luke, I'm here, and what can I do for yer, pard o' ther Ribbons?" said Dandy in his free-and-easy way as he came forward, while the stablemen were putting in a fresh team of six horses, for the trail beyond was a mountainous one.

"I wants ter interdoce yer to a leddy, Dandy, who rides on ter Last Chance with yer."

"I doesn't recommender her name, never hevin' heard it, but what's the odds so long as she knows you."

"This, miss, are ther pard I spoke of, Reuben Rainbolt, whom we calls Dandy, for he are one, as yer sees by his git-up."

"But he hain't no fool in spite o' his looks, an' thar hain't no ribbon-holder on ther Overland has got more grit when it comes ter whar sand are wanted."

"I are glad ter meet yer, miss, and proud to hev yer on the outside with me, for I was afeerd I'd hev ter put up with a Jew, as they gen'ally likes ther box ontill night time, and then, Lord love yer, they sails inside and occupies the best part o' ther old hears."

"I'm proud of yer acquaintance, miss," and Dandy doffed his hat and bowed low, and went into the tavern with Luke to get a drink.

"Are she ugly, Luke?"

"Ugly! she are purtier than a painted wagon, and her voice are as sweet as a anglin' playin' on a flute."

"Lordy, Dandy, she are a stunner from 'way back, and what biz she hev in this dog-goned kentry o' cut-throats I'd like ter know; but she's too much fer me, fer though she kin ask more questions than a catechiz, she jist forgits ter answer a single one I axes her, and you jist hear me talk."

"Waal, I'm glad o' her comp'ny, Luke, as I told her, and didn't I make a bow as paralyzed her?"

"Why, I jist spread my arms ter catch her, as I thought she'd take a tumble off ther old hears in admiration."

"Who else are along?"

"A Jew man, some widdy a-lookin' fer another durned fool to marry her, and a miner."

"Any news?"

"Nary, more than orders are ter keep yer eyes open, fer ther Devil's Dozen are about, and thar is a treasure-box aboard."

"All right; here's luck, and I'm off."

With this, Dandy left the saloon and walked out to his team.

All was ready for him, but Dandy was not the man to hurry, and coolly drew on his gloves, while Luke Goulding stepped upon the fore wheel and bade the fair passenger good-by.

Then Dandy took his seat, made his passenger

more comfortable alongside of him, seized the reins, and showed his skill by a whirl and crack of his long-lashed, gold-handled whip.

The stable-boys sprung away from the heads of the horses, the leaders leaped into the air, and away dashed the coach at a fifteen-miles-an-hour pace, to draw down to slow speed when it got out of sight of the station.

"Travelin' fer, miss?" began Dandy Rainbolt, when he had settled down to regular work.

"To the mining-camp of Last Chance, I believe they call it, and Mr. Goulding said you were acquainted there, but he was not," and the voice of the fair passenger did credit to Luke's description of it, for it was low, and sweet in tone.

"Yas, miss, I hev driven hearse in and out o' thar for six months now, since the comp'ny run ther line thar."

"Is it much of a place?"

"Lordy, it are a mining-camp, miss."

"But there is a hotel there?"

"Yas, miss, several of them, but only one fer you to go, and that is ther Hash House, kept by Landlord Ross Sampson, ther whitest man in Last Chance— Lordy!"

"What is the matter?" asked the lady, in some alarm at Dandy's sudden exclamation.

"Yer sprung it on me too sudden like, miss."

"Sprung what on you?"

"Thet angil face o' yourn—why, when yer turned back thet kiver yer wears, it jist tuk my breath away ter see a livin' angil right alongside of me, like yer hed jist lighted in ther box from Paradise."

The lady blushed deeply, but not in anger, for the compliment was too honestly meant, and then she broke into a silvery laugh, which Dandy afterward told Luke sounded like a "jubilee o' singing birds with velvet in their throats."

"I thank you for your very pretty compliment, Mr. Rainbolt; but are there any ladies at the Hash House, as you call Landlord Sampson's hotel?"

"Now thar is, and she are a beauty, too."

"She are ther landlord's daughter, and the boys calls her Gold Grip's Angil, fer her pa jist coins gold; whenever he gits his grip on anything it tarns ter yaller dust, and so they names him Gold Grip, miss."

"But he are a gent—one who hev seen hard times in ther past, I guesses, and come out here ter git a fortin'."

"And it's got, too, and we is afeerd o' losin' him and ther Angil— Lordy! ther Devils is abroad fer sart'in, and we is in fer it," and Dandy pointed ahead to several horsemen who rode down into the trail and halted.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE DEVIL'S DOZEN ON HAND.

THE words of Dandy Rainbolt took all the color from the beautiful face of his fair passenger, but otherwise she seemed to be unmoved.

"They are road-agents!" she said, quietly.

"Yes, miss."

"Can you not turn back?"

"Look behind you, miss."

"Ah! they are there too."

"Yes, miss, Cap'n Cruel always plays a game to win."

"Captain Cruel?"

"Yas, and cruel he are by natur'."

"He is chief of the outlaw band known as the Devil's Dozen?"

"He are, miss, and I is right sorry you is alone."

"Do not mind me, sir."

"You has fine jewelry, I sees, and money, too, I guesses."

"Yes, my purse is pretty well filled."

"Too bad."

"What will you do, sir?"

"I kin only hold up when they commands me, for ter run would bring their fire, and though I'd risk it ag'in' myself and them as is inside ther hearse, I'm durned ef I will fer you."

"Is not that Captain Cruel seated on the horse off to one side?"

"That's him; but, how did you know him?"

"He looks like the chief."

"Ah! he are a dandy, he is! but, his neck will stretch some day with bemp, haughty-like as he carries his head now. But, here we is, and the music is about ter begin," and Dandy drew his horses down to a walk as they neared the six horsemen drawn up across the road, and with Captain Cruel alone and to one side.

Behind, following slowly, were six more horsemen, so that the coach was completely entrapped.

All of the thirteen were masked and rode black horses, and an ominous, dangerous set of men they looked, and so thought the fair passenger.

"What is the matter, driver?" petulantly asked a passenger from within the coach, as Dandy drew rein.

"Jist take a peep out and see fer yerself, old gent."

There was no need to do so, for loud came the command from Captain Cruel:

"Hands up or die, Dandy Rainbolt."

"All correct, Cap'n Cruel, fer ther hands, fer I hain't ready ter hand in my checks yet," and

Dandy took a turn of his reins around his brake and held up his hands.

"Who have you worthy of my attention?" asked the chief, and he rode forward, in vain trying to penetrate the thick veil of the fair passenger as he did so.

"This leddy, as yer see, and a few insiders thet yer kin tackle ter please yerself, fer yer will I knows."

"You have a treasure-box on board, money sent out for gold-dust sent East?"

"Ef yer knows I has, why does yer ax me, Cap'n Cruel?"

"Have you not?"

"Ef yer kin find sich a box yer kin hev it with my compliments."

"Then I have been misinformed."

"Yer was informed O. K., but I kinder was informed, too, thet yer might be a nosin' along ther trail, so I left it back at Brandy Station."

"And I've a mind to put a bullet in your heart for it."

"No yer won't, fer ther trail would be too hot fer yer, ef yer kilt Dandy Rainbolt and yer knows it, or I softly lies."

"Well, your passengers must pay toll, so what have you, madam?"

"As I am to be robbed, sir, I regret to say that I have a well-filled purse."

"Anything else?"

"Will you not be content with my purse?"

"No."

"But you will not take my jewelry, surely?"

"Yes, and unless you care to be searched, I advise you to hand over your money and jewels."

"I prefer to give up all, sir, rather than be contaminated by the touch of such as you are."

"Ah! you strike back with your tongue, do you? Well, a woman's tongue has no sting for me, where her gold and jewels act as a salve for my wounded feelings."

"Pray do not detain me."

"You has got ter hang yet, yer masked-faced wolf, and when I says now-I-lay-me at night, I is goin' ter throw in a prayer ter be at the hangin', fer I'd like ter remind yer o' this day's work, Cap'n Cruel," recklessly spoke Dandy Rainbolt.

"You'll not live to be there, Driver Dandy, if you do not keep a more civil tongue in your head; but I am waiting, madam."

"I shall not detain you, sir," and the passenger handed down to him a pocketbook which he at once opened.

"Ah! you travel well supplied, madam, and I do not know but what I would do well to hold you for ransom, for there must be a fat bank account behind this pocketbook."

"Now your jewels, please?"

She raised her hands and took from her ears two large diamond earrings, and handed them to him.

"Indeed? You are a valuable passenger; but, you wear rings, doubtless?"

"Yes, this may be of service to you, sir," and she drew from her finger a large ruby ring.

"Anything else, madam?"

"You will certainly let me keep my watch and chain, sir, as souvenirs I care not to part with."

"No, I wish all, madam."

She handed them over, and then Captain Cruel turned to the other passengers, who were also robbed of all the worldly possessions they had with them.

The miner sought to hide a roll of bills, and the keen eyes of the outlaw chief saw it.

"Ha! would you attempt to deceive me? Take that!"

A flash and report followed, and the miner dropped dead in his tracks, for the bullet of the cruel robber leader had pierced his brain.

A cry broke from the lips of the lady passenger on the box, and she turned toward the murderer, and was about to speak, when Dandy said in a whisper:

"For God's sake, don't speak, for he's got inter his killin' mood now."

She remained silent, and ordering his men to throw the miner's body upon the top of the coach, it was at once done.

"Take that fellow into Last Chance, Rainbolt, to show that I will not be trifled with, and if you leave off another treasure-box to defraud me, I'll send you in dead on your box."

"Do you hear?"

"Yes; and you hear me tell you I dare you to do it," was the plucky response.

"Oo!"

"You bet I does," and Dandy cracked his whip, which was not taken from him, nor his jewelry either, for the road-agents were bound not to rob the drivers, or to kill them, unless they attempted to dash by when ordered to halt.

"Miss," said Dandy, softly, when the coach had rolled on out of sight of the Devil's Dozen.

"Yes."

"I jist fooled him by a bluff, for the treasure-box are in thet foot-stool under your pretty feet."

"I certainly congratulate you, Mr. Rainbolt, and let me tell you a secret, too."

"Yes, miss."

"See here!"

She held out another pocketbook as she spoke, and Dandy gave a loud whistle of surprise, while he said:

"You is a clever one, miss."

"In this pocketbook is good money, Mr. Rainbolt, but in the other there are a lot of bogus bills I happened to get hold of one day, and determined to use as I just did."

"And here, you see, are my diamond earrings and rings, while the others I gave to that thief and murderer are paste jewels only, and not worth five dollars."

"Sold! oh, Lord! sold!" and Dandy laughed so loud that those in the coach thought he had suddenly gone mad.

After a ride of a few miles further, and just as Dandy had said that Last Chance was but half an hour's drive away, the clatter of hoofs was heard behind.

"Lady, they has found out ther cheat and is arter us!" cried Dandy, and he sent his team flying along, while glancing back, the passenger uttered a cry, as suddenly there darted into view a horse and rider.

The horse was coming on at a rapid pace, but behind it swept into view a pursuer, and then others.

"It is a woman!" cried the passenger on the box.

One glance did Dandy take over his shoulder, and then he hissed forth:

"It are Gold Grip's Angil, and ther Devil's Dozen is arter her!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

A CAPTIVE.

AS nothing had been seen of the Devil's Dozen of late, Stella Sampson had begun again to take long horseback rides about the country.

Matters were progressing at Last Chance as smoothly as ever, if it could be called smooth at all, and Bunco Bill had recovered from his wound in the head and resumed his duties once more.

Dick Deadly Hand had not seemed very happy of late, and he and Butterfly had become as thick as thieves, for they were always together, while Poker Pete was often seen with them.

The Man from Mexico often appeared in the Live and Let Live at night, and his luck as a gambler did not desert him.

He too, was wont to take long rides about the mountains and valleys, and it was hinted that he sometimes stayed away from his cabin all night.

Dick Deadly Hand was convinced that when Stella rode off alone, it was to meet the Man from Mexico, and he longed for the time when Captain Cruel would carry out his pledge to kidnap her, and he anxiously asked Butterfly each day if he had had news of the chief, and was disappointed when the same answer was returned each time to his query:

"No, but he'll be along some day, and all will be well."

Poker Pete had not lost belief in his eyes, and still swore that Captain Reckless was none other than Captain Cruel, and he and Dick Deadly Hand were arranging various plots together to prove that the Man from Mexico was a spy in Last Chance for the Devil's Dozen.

Ross Sampson was becoming more and more anxious to leave the place, and was quietly arranging his business affairs there with that view.

He had noticed that Stella had seemed changed since the coming of the Man from Mexico, and he feared that she loved him.

The more he saw of the Senor Merl the more he liked him, and yet he had confessed himself a professional gambler, and certainly he was not the man for a husband for his lovely daughter.

So he intended to get away from Last Chance as soon as possible, and congratulated himself that he would return to the East a far richer man than he had ever been before.

He recalled, too, with pride, that his career had been without a stain on his hands, and if he had made money at every turn he had defrauded no one in doing so.

He had kept a frontier hotel, with bar and gambling saloon attached, and yet he had done no wrong in the act, and this was a cause of congratulation also to him.

He blamed himself for not having made Stella return East at once, and yet she had been a great comfort to him there, and certainly she had not lowered her dignity in remaining there even among the wild lot of men who surrounded her.

Then, too, Landlord Sampson had begun to dread Dick Deadly Hand.

He seemed to intuitively know that he meant mischief, toward the Man from Mexico, and he feared toward Stella also.

He saw him much with Butterfly, an individual whom he mistrusted, and who was an unfathomable mystery to all in Last Chance.

Then, too, he had seen Poker Pete much with the two, and since his recovery from his wound Eucher Charlie had appeared to be very thick with the others and thus a dangerous quartette was formed which Ross Sampson dreaded were hatching evil.

He had heard the rumor that the Man from Mexico was a secret ally of the road-agents, and he said to himself that Last Chance was on the eve of a volcano.

So matters stood when one afternoon Stella went off for a ride on horseback.

To her regret her fleetest horse was lame, and she rode a pony which Dick Deadly Hand had presented to her, and which she could not refuse to accept for fear of offending him.

Dick Deadly Hand had told her of a number of beautiful wild flowers he had seen in a glen off the Overland Trail, and she had gone there to get them.

Either she had mistaken the glen, or the flowers had bloomed only in Dick's imagination, for she could not find any, and had turned her horse homeward when she saw some horsemen approaching.

A minute sooner and she could have turned out of the glen into the stage trail, but as it was she saw that the horsemen would reach the town almost as soon as she did.

So she put her horse into a sweeping gallop, and to her dismay the horsemen, five in number, did the same.

Then in dire alarm she urged her pony to full speed to reach the turn, while she said to herself:

"Oh, if I only was mounted on Arrow!"

But she reached the turn ahead of the horsemen, and sent her horse flying down the trail of the Overland.

To her horror she had recognized the horsemen, for they were some of the Devil's Dozen.

She had caught sight of their black horses, motionless faces, which showed they were masks, and their costumes all alike.

Down the trail she swept, some hundred yards in advance of her pursuers, though one now began to gain upon her rapidly.

Around the bend she went, and before her eyes was the stage-coach, rolling on its way to Last Chance.

She waved her whip wildly, to see the coach go rapidly on, and a glance over her shoulder showed her that one of her pursuers was but a short distance away.

Suddenly he called out;

"Halt, or I will force you to do so!"

She paid no heed to his command, and next came the words:

"Hold hard to your saddle, for I intend to stop your horse suddenly."

Mechanically she obeyed, and then came three short, sharp calls:

"Dick! Dick! Dick!"

Almost instantly the pony she rode tossed up his head, bolted, and turned back, just as the horseman dashed up.

"I am glad you were not thrown, Miss Sampson, by his sudden bolt; you are a splendid rider, permit me to say, though I have no time for compliments now."

"You must go with me."

"How dare you halt me thus, sir, and what do your words mean?"

"Simply that you are my captive, Miss Sampson, and shall so remain until your father pays the price I demand for you."

"Come, do not make it unpleasant for yourself by forcing me to bind you to your saddle."

"I will accompany you without force, as I am in your power."

"You are wise," and, seizing her bridle-rein, he wheeled alongside of her, and with his men, who had now come up, following, started back on the trail he had come."

"If I mistake not, you are Captain Cruel, Chief of the Devil's Dozen, for no other man would do what you have?" said Stella indignantly.

"I am Captain Cruel, Miss Sampson."

"And is this a plot to kidnap me, sir, or was it an accident my meeting you?"

"Did you hear my call to your horse?"

"I did."

"Does that not prove that it was design?"

"Ah! this horse is trained, I know, and by Dick Desmond."

The road-agent smiled, and Stella asked quickly:

"Am I to understand that Desmond is in this outrage against me?"

"Miss Sampson, Mr. Desmond is your devoted admirer; he loves you with all his heart, and, fearing that the Man from Mexico would steal you from him, he sought my aid to kidnap you."

"When I had you in my power he was to come and rescue you, and thus win your undying regard, and there, in my camp he was to make you his wife, as I have a friend who keeps a chaplain on hand—I refer to White Wolf the Renegade."

"You see how very frank I am with you, for I wish you to know all."

"It is just what I wish to know, sir, so pray continue your most interesting story," said Stella.

"There is nothing more to tell, more than to say that since seeing you I have decided to break my compact with Dick Deadly Hand and win your love myself," was the very cool rejoinder of the outlaw captain.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MAN FROM MEXICO TAKES THE TRAIL.

WHEN the fair passenger on the stage coach saw the outlaws come up with Stella and cap-

ture her, she uttered a cry of alarm, and begged to Dandy to draw rein.

"We kin do nothin', miss, but drive on inter Last Chance with all speed and set the Man from Mexico on ther trail, with ther boys ter foller him—Lordy! thar he comes now—hooray!"

Dandy ended his words with a yell and a cheer as he saw a horseman suddenly appear in sight coming toward them.

"What a superb looking man; who is he?" asked the lady in a low tone, as Dandy drew rein and the horseman came on at an easy gallop.

"Ther Man from Mexico, miss; but I'll tell yer more arter awhile—hold on, senor, 'cause I hes news fer yer."

The Man from Mexico drew rein, doffed his gold-braided sombrero and bowed low, while he asked in his pleasant way:

"Well, Dandy, what can I do for you?"

"Kill that imp o' Satan, Cap'n Cruel."

"Ha! has he halted you?"

"Yes, and more, too, robbed ther coach to ther best o' his knowledge, and then cut across ther ridge, and just gave chase ter Gold Grit's Angel, and captered her afore our very eyes."

"When?" and the eyes of the Mexican seemed to flash fire, though he was perfectly calm.

"Not a quarter of an hour ago."

"Where?"

"Back on ther trail, near Burnt Rock."

"You are sure it was Captain Cruel?"

"Sart'in."

"And his men?"

"Ther Dozen was with him when he halted ther coach, but only four was with him when he took Gold Grip's Angel."

"And he went back along the trail?"

"Yes."

"Carrying Miss Sampson with him?"

"Sart'in."

"Dandy?"

"Sir to you."

"I will take the trail and follow it, wherever it may lead, and so say to Mr. Sampson; but it would be well if the landlord would get together a band of miners, say thirty, or more, and follow, and I will leave a trail they can make no mistake in following."

"Good for you, Man o' Mexico," cried Dandy, with enthusiasm.

"And Dandy, can I trust you?"

"Waal, I sh'ud weep ef yer c'u'dn't."

"Then tell only Mr. Sampson that I am on the trail; but say it is a man you got to follow and mark the way."

"I understands yer, pard."

"And be sure that there are four men among the pursuers, whom I shall name, and tell Mr. Sampson not to leave without them."

"Who is them four, pard?" asked Dandy, with considerable interest.

"Dick Deadly Hand."

"One," counted Dandy.

"Poker Pete."

"Two."

"Butterfly."

"Three."

"And Eucher Charlie."

"Four."

"See to this, Dandy, for much depends upon it, and I trust to you."

"I'll do it."

"And say to Mr. Sampson not to feel uneasy about his daughter, for no harm will befall her."

"If I could only think so, sir," said the passenger, speaking for the first time to the Man from Mexico.

"You may be sure of it, madam."

"Now I will go," and again raising his sombrero, the Man from Mexico rode away at a canter, while Dandy drove on toward Last Chance at a slapping pace.

"Who is that wonderful-looking man, Mr. Rainbolt?" asked the passenger as they sped along.

"All we know in Last Chance, miss, are that he writ his name on ther book at ther Hash House as Senor Merl, Mexico, and we do call him ther Man from Mexico."

"He are a gambler, and he plays ter win, but are thet good he never plays with a poor man, and gives a heap of his winnings to folks as is needy."

"He tuk a house at Last Chance as five men had been banged out, and it are know'd as Dead Man's Den, and he hev showed thet he are lightnin' on ther draw and sart'in death on ther shoot, while he hev a grip on him thet they do say hev not been ekal'd since the day o' Sampson yer reads of in the Bible."

"Ther are all I knows of thet Man o' Mexico, miss, but I venters ther opinion as we sail along this trail, thet Cap'n Cruel are goin' ter make his most intimate acquaintanceship afore ther week are ended; but here we is, miss, and I'll first interdoce yer to ther landlord, and then tell o' what hev tuk place."

In another minute the coach drew up before the Hash House, and Dandy, with great pride introduced his fair passenger, though he had not yet discovered what her name was.

"Please register me, Mr. Sampson, as Miss Weston, and then Mr. Rainbolt has an impor-

tant commuication to make to you," she said to Ross Sampson, who was surprised at seeing such a person come to Last Chance.

When he had heard her request he said:

"Miss Weston, I will ask you to go over to my cabin, for this is no fit place for you alone, and my daughter will be most glad to receive you."

"I thank you, sir; but alas! it is of your daughter that Mr. Rainbolt has to tell you," and Dandy stepped quickly forward and told his story.

Ross Sampson turned deathly pale, but uttered no word while the driver, in his odd way told all that had occurred.

Then he said:

"If man can save her, that Man from Mexico is the one; but we must do as he says, and I will start on the trail as soon as I can get a party of well-mounted men."

"Count me in, Ross Sampson, for I doesn't go out fer five days on ther return trip."

"I will, and I am glad to have you go, Dandy, for I know you."

"And don't forgit thet gang o' four ther Man from Mexico named over."

"No, I shall ask them in such a way that all must go."

"And I, too, sir, must go," said Myra Weston, firmly.

"You, Miss Weston?"

"Yes, for your daughter will need what aid I can give her."

"No, no, you must not think of it, for—"

"Mr. Sampson, I will go, for I tell you frankly I came out to this place to see Captain Cruel, and for no other purpose."

"You / to see that man?"

"Yes."

"I regret to hear this, for—"

"Mr. Sampson, and you, Driver Rainbolt, don't misunderstand me, or who and what I am."

"I came to see Captain Cruel run down, for he is the murderer of my father."

"Ah! you shall go, Miss Weston, and Dandy will get a horse for you."

"I will get one of Mexico's, Ross Sampson, and ride t'other myself."

"Good! now, Miss Weston, let me show you to my cabin, where you can have supper and rest, for it will be some time, I fear before we can get off, as good horses are a scarcity in Last Chance," and while Dandy went off to see about the horses of the Man from Mexico, Ross Sampson escorted his beautiful guest to his own cabin and left her in possession of Stella's room.

Then he sallied forth to pick his men for the pursuit, and was not long in finding the four whom the Man from Mexico had been so urgent to have.

As usual they were together, and he said earnestly:

"I am glad to find you four gentlemen, for I have a great favor to ask of you, and which I know you will grant."

"The truth is, Dandy has come in and reports seeing my daughter chased by some horsemen along the trail, and he was sure they caught her."

"He saw one man whom he asked to follow and mark the trail, and now I wish a good number to go with me and recapture her."

"What do you say, my good friend Dick Deadly Hand?"

The young miner looked nervous, but Butterfly said promptly:

"He's upset at ther news, pard, but of course he goes, as I will also."

"And you, Poker Pete?"

"I'm along, landlord."

"And you, Eucher Charlie?"

"I goes with t'others, you bet."

"I thank you," and Landlord Sampson returned to the hotel and an hour after thirty riders left Last Chance in pursuit of the kidnapers of Gold Grip's Angel and one of them was Myra Weston.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SENIOR MERL HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

THE scene of the capture of Stella was soon revealed, and from here the party pressed rapidly on until the trail turned off into the mountains.

The trail was plainly marked here, and they went along without delay, all wondering who had gone on ahead and left them such easy work.

But here Dandy came in with ready lie and said he didn't know the man, but had seen him often in Last Chance.

"It looks like ther huf o' Mexico's horse," said Dick Deadly Hand, somewhat nervously, Mr. Sampson thought.

"Ef yer thinks I are sich a fool as not ter know ther Man o' Mexico, Dick, I'll cut yer acquaintance," said Dandy, indignantly.

There was much comment among the men as to who Myra Weston was, and why she had come along on such a trip.

She rode splendidly, and her beauty won the admiration and respect of all.

At length night came and there was but one thing to do, camp on the trail.

The plainest trail could not be followed in the darkness through the mountains.

Dandy had prepared for this, and Myra was made most comfortable in a small canvas tent brought upon a pack-horse, and there were wraps in plenty for her too.

At the first streak of dawn the party were once more on the trail, and Dandy kept the lead.

Suddenly he came upon a slip of paper on a bush.

It was addressed to Mr. Sampson, and was in French.

Dandy handed it to the landlord who read it and said to the driver in a whisper:

"This is from Merl, and it says keep close watch on Deadly Hand, and upon Butterfly, and do not allow Poker Pete and Eucher Charlie to desert the party either."

"I'll jist call fu'st one, and then t'other, whom I can trust on ahead, pard, and give 'em a hint ter do as Mexico says," responded Dandy, and in an hour's time he had half a dozen good men watching the four.

After a halt for breakfast another slip of paper was found.

It was also in French, and read:

"He has headed either for his own retreat or the village of White Wolf. Press on rapidly for I am but a few miles behind him."

"He has his Dozen with him, for I count fourteen iron-shod horses, and there are fourteen unshod animals, showing Indian ponies, and as many horses, of course."

This was cheering news to Mr. Sampson and Dandy, and the former gave what explanation he deemed proper to the miners, while, as it was written in French, they all set the man down ahead, excepting the three who knew who he was, as Canada Carl, a Frenchman.

"We are thirty-three, Dandy, and the Man from Mexico makes one more," said the landlord.

"Call it half a dozen more, fer he are goin' ter be a buzz-saw in a scrimmage, pard," responded Dandy.

Myra Weston was pale, silent, yet determined.

She seemed not to feel fatigue, and often urged the landlord to press on at a more rapid pace.

At noon a halt was made for needed rest, and here another note was found on a bush, and the well-marked trail continued on as before.

This note was also in French, on a slip of paper torn from a note-book.

It was as follows:

"The outlaws met here two white men and a dozen red-skins, and they have gone on to the recent retreat of Captain Cruel."

"You will have to fight perhaps fifty all told, with those who may be at the retreat of the Devil's Dozen."

"I am sure that one of the white men who joined the outlaws is White Wolf."

"Men," said Landlord Sampson when he had read this note, "it is my duty to tell you that the Devil's Dozen have been joined by the White Wolf and a dozen braves, as well as another white man."

"They have gone on to the retreat of the Devil's Dozen, and, with those men who may be there, we will have to meet perhaps fifty desperate men, and we are but thirty-four, counting the trailer ahead of us."

"I wish you to know this, and now ask you what is to be done?"

There was a silence, and it was broken by the rich, firm voice of Myra Weston, saying:

"There is no man here who will brand himself as a coward, by refusing to go on when the Angel of Last Chance needs his aid!"

A cheer greeted her words, and the party proceeded on once more.

An hour's ride brought them to a clump of timber, and before them towered a lofty mountain range, pierced by a narrow canyon.

Suddenly a horseman appeared before them, and on every lip was the name:

"The Man from Mexico!"

It was the Man from Mexico, and he sat on his horse calmly awaiting them.

As the party rode up, quick as a flash his revolvers, one in each hand, covered two men.

These two were Dick Deadly Hand and Butterfly.

Unexpectedly it they were off their guard, and the Man of Mexico's stern words fell ominously upon their ears.

"Move a muscle and you die."

"Poker Pete, you and Eucher Charlie bind these men, if you wish to prove you are not their allies."

"I hev been the'r friend, and so has Charlie, but I guesses you has cause fer what yer does; but ef yer hasn't then thar will be death-music sung around you, Pard Mexico," said Poker Pete.

"I will take all the consequences."

"Bind these men."

There they sat, motionless and white-faced, and in an instant Poker Pete and Eucher Charlie had them disarmed and bound to their horses.

"Poker Pete, I did class you in with them, but I learned from that man yonder you were

simply used by them, as was also Eucher Charlie, as a blind for their purpose."

"Gentlemen, this man, Butterfly, is the spy of the Devil's Dozen in Last Chance, and Mr. Sampson, your daughter was captured at the instigation of Dick Deadly Hand, who leagued himself with Captain Cruel for that purpose, and he intended to get up a bogus rescue of her and thus urge her into a marriage with him."

"And, Poker Pete, let me now tell you that you were right, for the man you said was Captain Cruel that night in the saloon, was indeed the chief of the Devil's Dozen, and I knew it at the time."

"But he had saved my life once, saved me from being burned at the stake by Comanches, and I saved him then."

"I warned him to go his way and never to set foot in Last Chance again, or harm one of its people, and he did not heed my warning, and as he has seen fit to disregard it, he shall suffer the full consequences, for his retreat is yonder, and he has, all told, just forty-four men to defend it."

"The man you see yonder is my spy, and he has been a member of the band of Captain Cruel for six months past; and I may now tell you that I am an officer of the Mexican Army, sent here on a Secret Service trail, the end of which I have nearly reached."

"Perdido, come here."

The miners had listened with deepest attention to all that the Man from Mexico had said, and their eyes turned upon the one he had addressed as Perdido, and who now came forward, while a huge black dog trotted at his heels.

The man wore a mask and was dressed in the uniform of the outlaws, and his horse was hitched not far away.

"Senors, this is my ally, Senor Perdido, a captain in the Mexican Army, and as you see, in the dress of the Devil's Dozen, which he put on to render thereby a service to his Government."

"He has done his duty, and will now aid us in capturing Captain Cruel and his band, as also the renegade White Wolf and a number of his braves."

"There are two men among the Devil's Dozen who must be taken alive, and Senor Perdido and myself will see to them."

"They are the chief and his next in command, this man, Butterfly, being the third in rank."

"As for the rest, they might as well be shown no mercy, for they do not deserve it at your hands."

"Senor Perdido will send a messenger which will bring the chief and his lieutenant here, and perhaps several others, when they will be captured."

"Then we can move on into the canyon and surprise the others in the retreat, and it must be quick and deadly work you do."

"One word more—there is a man there in the retreat in the garb of a priest, and under no circumstances harm him, for when the fight begins he will be an ally."

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

All gave their assent, and then the Man from Mexico said:

"Now, Senor Perdido, we will go forward, and you send your messenger."

The Senor Perdido then wrote a few lines upon a slip of paper, and read them aloud:

"Will the chief and Lieutenant Sandoz come to the outpost, as there is one here to see them?"

The paper was put in the secret receptacle in the dog's collar, and he went off at a run, while the miners fell back to a hiding-place, and the Man from Mexico taking an Indian head-dress and blanket, quickly disguised himself by putting them on, and then stood near the Senor Perdido.

Then he placed a dozen of the miners in hiding, and Poker Pete, Eucher Charlie and two others were given lassos and told what to do.

Fifteen minutes passed away, and then out of the canyon dashed four horsemen.

There were two in advance, and Senor Perdido said aloud:

"They are the captain and Senor Sandoz."

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

THE four outlaws came on at a gallop, the dog who had betrayed them, running ahead, and as they approached and saw the form of a supposed Indian standing near the sentinel, they drew their horses to a slower gait.

"What the deuce does Paloz mean, calling for us to see a red-skin?" angrily said Captain Cruel.

But Sandoz, his lieutenant, could give him no information, and so they rode on.

As they came up to the outpost, Captain Cruel called out:

"Paloz, what—"

But his words were not spoken, for the tall form of the Man from Mexico sprang upon him, and he was dragged from his saddle, while his horse was caught by a lariat noose thrown by Poker Pete.

At the same instant, Senor Perdido captured Sandoz just as cleverly, and the other two outlaws found themselves surrounded and covered by a dozen rifles, while their horses were caught

by lariats skillfully thrown by miners who understood the art.

It was but the work of a few seconds, and the four men were prisoners, and Captain Cruel, foaming with rage, his mask torn from his face, was glaring upon the Man from Mexico like a tiger.

"And I owe this to you, you whose life I saved!" he hissed forth.

"Senor, I canceled that debt by saving your life in return, and I then warned you."

"It is true you saved me from death, an awful death, but you did so not from mercy, but to have me guide you through a country you did not know."

"Now, let me say to you that I am not what you have believed me, an itinerant gambler, but Colonel Merl Merida, of the First Mexican Lanceros, and Chief of the Secret Service Department, and I have been on your trail and that of the Senor Sandoz, as conspirators against the Government of Mexico, and the originators of a hellish plot that cost many lives."

"You fled into the United States, but armed with the proper papers from both Governments, Senor Captain Perdido and myself have dogged you to the end of your trail, and we will not release our clutch upon you until you go back to Mexico to expiate your crimes by an ignominious death."

"Senor Gabriel Godfrey, as I knew you in the long ago, when you were, as I believed, a gentleman, and my guest on board my yacht, it is painful for me to be the cause of your sad end; but I am the instrument, and fate ordains it that you shall be the victim."

The impressive manner of Colonel Merl Merida had its influence upon all, and he was gazed upon with a feeling of almost awe by the miners, who saw who and what had been the man who had dwelt in their midst as a professional gambler.

Turning to Mr. Sampson the Mexican said:

"I am going to impose an important duty upon you, sir, and that is to remain here with two men and guard these prisoners, four in number, while also this lady must be under your protection, as she cannot go on with us."

"When the fight is over, I will send for you, sir."

"But I will strike no blow, sir, to rescue my child, and—"

"You will render me greater service, sir, and your daughter also, by doing as I ask."

"I obey, sir," was the reply, and the prisoners were made fast to the trees near by, while Dick Deadly Hand and Butterfly were placed in the front rank, bound as they were, to go into the charge upon the retreat of the outlaws.

"They is fixin' ter kill us, pard," said Dick Deadly Hand, as the party moved forward, with the Man from Mexico, Senor Perdido and Dandy riding in the lead, with the two bound prisoners next to the gallant leaders.

"It's better than hanging, Pard Dick," returned Butterfly lightly, and the remark seemed really to cheer up the miner.

Into the canyon they went at a slow pace, and thus on to the bend, when, with a word from the Man from Mexico, the gallant miners dashed forward in a charge and with ringing cheers.

There was not a shadow of doubt but that the surprise was complete, for there were eight or ten outlaws lolling about their camps, while seated before the quarters of the chief were White Wolf, Homer Hume and Gold Grip's Angel.

The Indians, under Blue Eyes, with their ponies staked out, were resting under some trees near by.

"Into the cabin, Miss Sampson! in for your life!" came in the ringing voice of the Man from Mexico, and as Stella hesitated, Detective Hume, still in his attire as a priest, seized her quickly in his arms and carried her within the cabin.

Then he rushed out, closed the door after him, and with a revolver in each hand sprang to the aid of the miners with a vigor that caused Dandy to call out:

"Lordy, pards, jist see thet Sky Pilot fight!"

And Dandy was right, for Detective Hume had shot down one outlaw, killed a red-skin and grasping another of the Devil's Dozen by the arm shouted:

"Hands up, Scott Gibbons! you are my prisoner!"

"I surrender! My trail has ended," replied the ex-cashier of the State Bank, and he was the detective's prisoner and secured with a skill and quickness that would have amazed Driver Dandy the more had he seen it, which he did not, for he had swept on with the Man from Mexico into the midst of the red-skin allies of the outlaws.

The battle was sharp, quick and deadly, and soon won by the miners, and Stella Sampson was almost dazed at the suddenness of her rescue.

Having won the fight, the Man from Mexico sent Captain Perdido to escort Mr. Sampson, Myra and the prisoners to the retreat, while he set men to work to hastily remove the dead and wounded from sight.

The miners had suffered but little, but as though a just fate had directed the bullet, Dick Deadly Hand had been shot through the heart

in the charge, and Butterfly had escaped death, to be told by Colonel Merl Merida, that, as he had also been in the conspiracy, he would be taken back to Mexico for trial.

"And I owe this to you," said Stella, with tears in her eyes, as she grasped the hand of the Man from Mexico.

"You owe it to us all, and we are happy in serving our Angel of Last Chance.

"But here comes your father, and there is a lady with him for you to welcome," and the Mexican officer turned to greet the party as they rode up, Mr. Sampson and Myra Weston side by side.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

WHEN the Man from Mexico had led his men in to attack the retreat of the outlaws, Myra Weston had asked Mr. Sampson if he would lead the chief apart from the rest for her to speak with, and he promptly did so.

"And do you remain, please, to hear what I have to say," she said; so the landlord remained near.

"You do not know me, Gabriel Godfrey, beneath my veil. Let me show you who I am."

She raised her veil as she spoke and a cry, like that of a wild beast hard hit, burst from the man's lips, while he said in a voice hardly audible:

"I thought you were dead, Myra, for Reynolds so told me."

"If he did, it was for some purpose of his own, perhaps because I said to him I was dead to you, and maybe to keep me from being further persecuted by you.

"No, he told me all, how you sent him to rob me, and you know that I saw you that fatal night.

"You know that I shielded you, then, the murderer of my father, for you received my letter.

"You are a forger, Gabriel Godfrey, and I hold the proofs, those notes, which I bought from Samuel Spencer, whom you nearly ruined financially.

"And I know you now as an American who went to Mexico with one other, known in Last Chance as Butterfly, and headed a conspiracy against the Government, and fled to save your lives.

"But, you have been tracked down by that brave Mexican officer.

"I placed a detective on your track, and he followed your ally, White Wolf, to his lair, and thus found you, and though in a sacred garb you sought to kill him, and even now may have done so."

"Hail was that priest, your detective?"

"Yes."

"I feared that man from the first. You will find him alive and well in my camp. I sent for him to be there to unite in marriage that man's daughter to Dick Deadly Hand; but, after meeting Miss Sampson I determined she should become my bride. She should have been forced to wed me but for that infernal devil whom you call the Man from Mexico."

"Well, Gabriel Godfrey, I well know the man I thought I once loved, and I came here to gloat over your fate, and to save Homer Hume, the detective.

"I came to tell you that you had inherited a large fortune, and yet a murderer, and a fugitive from justice, a forger, you dared not return to enjoy it, and so it will go to charity.

"But you have been tracked down, and your fate will be a cruel one, so I will not gloat over you now, but pity you, though forgive you I never can."

Mr. Sampson gave her his arm and led her away.

"Let me never see him again," she said, and, just then, Captain Perido dashed up to say the fight was won, Stella had been rescued and he was to lead Miss Weston and the others to the retreat.

As Myra Weston dismounted at the cabin, she was presented to Stella Sampson, who greeted her most affectionately, while a voice at her side said:

"And so you have rescued me, Miss Weston?"

One look and she recognized Homer Hume through his disguise, and with both her hands, she clasped his, while she said:

"Yes, I came to rescue you; but this gallant Mexican officer has done it all, and our thanks are due to him. But, you nobly did your part."

"Three cheers for the Man from Mexico," yelled Dandy Rainbolt and they were given with a will.

Preparations were made to at once start on the retreat, for, as the White Wolf had escaped, they knew not how soon he might bring his warriors down upon them.

So, with the prisoners and wounded, the dead having been quickly buried, and the horses and plunder from the outlaw camp, the victorious warriors set out upon their return to Last Chance, while the Man from Mexico became more of a hero than ever.

CHAPTER LIX.

CONCLUSION.

BEFORE the cavalcade reached Last Chance, the Man from Mexico asked Mr. Sampson to ride on ahead with him, and when alone he said:

"Mr. Sampson, I have an explanation to make to you, sir, and I will tell you my story.

"I am a Mexican, but my mother was an American, and when a youth I was a midshipman in the Navy of Mexico.

"While our vessel was in a port in Spain I saved the life of a young girl of my own age, and we fell desperately in love with each other.

"One day she went with me to a priest, who married us. Soon after I was ordered away and my vessel was wrecked upon the coast of Africa, and all were believed to be lost and were so reported, but, I escaped, and yet was for years a prisoner to the Moors.

"At last I escaped from my cruel captivity, sailed for China in a vessel then in port, and thence to America, arriving in Mexico six years after I had sailed from there.

"My health was broken; but possessed of a large fortune, I built a yacht and sailed to Spain for my girl bride.

"There I discovered that she, believing me dead, had remarried, and never had revealed our secret marriage.

"I sailed to America, and there met a man I believed to be a gentleman, and invited him to cruise with me on my yacht.

"That man was Gabriel Godfrey. He told me that the one I had ever loved was a widow, and, so cruising near her home on the Long Island Sound one day I sent a sailor ashore with a note, telling her that I was not dead and would come to claim her.

"The gentleman whose wife she supposed herself to be was not dead, and the shock must have turned her brain, for she rowed out upon the waters, accompanied by her little daughter, and leaped overboard.

"I saw the act, and I saved the daughter, but the mother was lost.

"Mr. Sampson, your face tells me that you understood all from the time I began my story, for your wife must have told you of her former marriage.

"I came to Last Chance on special duty, as you now know, and your daughter recognized me as her rescuer.

"I asked her not to speak of it, not admitting that she was right in her recognition.

"To her, sir, the story of the past must not be told; but, as I once loved her mother, I now love her, and as I saved her from death, I ask you to give her to me for my wife if I can win her heart. I await your answer, Mr. Sampson!"

Need I say what that answer was?

Last Chance was in the dumps, in spite of its victory over Captain Cruel and his men.

It had lost its most distinguished citizen, Ross Sampson, and also Gold Grip's Angel, for they departed for the East two weeks after Stella's rescue.

And Myra Weston accompanied them, while Homer Hume, the detective, acted as her escort, for, somehow, he had begun to feel that he had a claim upon her.

His prisoner, Gibbons, the defaulting cashier, had been sent on under the charge of Dandy, who got leave to take him there, and get a chance to see the great East, with all his expenses paid—a pleasure he could not resist.

Needless to say that he delivered his prisoner in safety, and the amount of the reward was placed to the credit of Detective Hume.

Dandy returned to drive the Winged Chariot, more of a dandy than ever, while he was brim full of the wonders he had seen.

Upon her return home Myra Weston was accompanied by Stella, who was to be her guest until Mr. Sampson fitted up the old mansion where he had lived since boyhood.

Homer Hume, after reporting to his chief, resigned his position, to the great regret of the force, and accepted the position of manager of the estate of Miss Weston, whose fortune was increasing at a ratio that made it necessary for her to seek an able assistant, and who more so than the gallant detective?

At least she so thought. And more; she was so much pleased with his management, that, when he asked her to be his wife, she consented, for, somehow he had won her love long before she realized the fact herself.

And one month after their wedding-day Myra received a letter that congratulated her, and wished for her and her husband the best of good fortune and happiness, while it told her that the writer was no longer known as White Wolf, the Renegade, but an honest Texas ranchero, and he hoped to so continue to be to the end of his life.

And this letter was signed Redford Reynolds.

And the Man from Mexico?

He safely conducted his three prisoners, Godfrey, Sandoz and Butterfly into Mexico, where they were quickly executed, having been long before sentenced to death.

Then he resigned from the army, and settling up his affairs, left for the United States in his yacht, and one pleasant afternoon dropped anchor off the lovely home of Ross Sampson, the millionaire miner, as he was called.

And there gathered in that lovely home, some weeks after, a few friends to witness the marriage of Colonel Merl Merida, late of the Mexican Secret Service, to Miss Stella Sampson, one time known as the Man from Mexico, and the Angel of Last Chance.

THE END.

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